

BLACK HISTORY & THE CLASS STRUGGLE

No. 27

A Black & Red
Spartacist Publication

\$3.00

**LIBERALISM
DESTROYED THE
BLACK STRUGGLE**
**HOW TO
REBUILD IT**

blackstruggle.org/27

Inside: DEI Purge, Cop Brutality, Labor, Mumia, Assata, L.A., South Africa

EDITORIAL NOTE FOR **BLACK STRUGGLE** IN TRUMP'S AMERICA

FEBRUARY 5—Things are getting pretty crazy. Trump snatched a foreign president. ICE thugs publicly executed Renee Good and Alex Pretti for “terrorism.” The war drums are beating, the cost of living is crushing...the situation does not look good. The U.S. imperialists seem almost unstoppable and they’re tearing up the liberal world order with a ferocity that is sometimes jarring.

The capitalist ruling class in this country is waging an all-sided assault to maintain world domination. They’re squeezing their enemies and allies abroad and working people here. For decades, the imperialists pretended to care about minorities while they plundered the world. But the veneer of enlightened liberal ideals is no more. “Human rights” imperialism is out and

good ole beat-em-over-the-head imperialism is back. The U.S. rulers can no longer afford the song and dance of giving a hug before stabbing you in the back. Now they just stab wildly, appearances be damned.

The oppressed are about to get it way worse than before. Trump celebrated inauguration day by declaring open season on black people with his war on DEI, and he’s unleashed violent terror targeting immigrants. It is undeniable that this round of reaction is rife with racist hatred. Black people know they have a target on their backs, but the black struggle is non-existent. The right wing is on the rise and all the liberal “allies” bounced.

We need to do something, but we must understand what went wrong in order to do right. We must learn the lessons of

past struggles to go forward. In service of this, we relaunch *Black History & the Class Struggle*.

The main article of this issue, “Liberalism Destroyed the Black Struggle” (page 16), explains why we are in such a bad spot. For decades, liberal leaders tied the struggle to the capitalists, who need black oppression to rule. From the civil rights movement to BLM, these leaders constrained the energy of the black masses and led them to defeat. This has only fueled the right and racist backlash.

We desperately need a new strategy. Class collaboration must be rejected and communist politics embraced to finally break the cycle of liberalism and reaction. To go forward, the black struggle must be

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BLACK HISTORY & THE CLASS STRUGGLE

Published by the Central Committee of the Spartacist League/U.S.

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The closing date for this issue is February 5.

Number 27

February 2026

Cover: 11 April 2025, Brooklyn Center, Minnesota: Protesters confront cops after the killing of Daunte Wright at a traffic stop earlier that day. Credit: Maturen/Getty

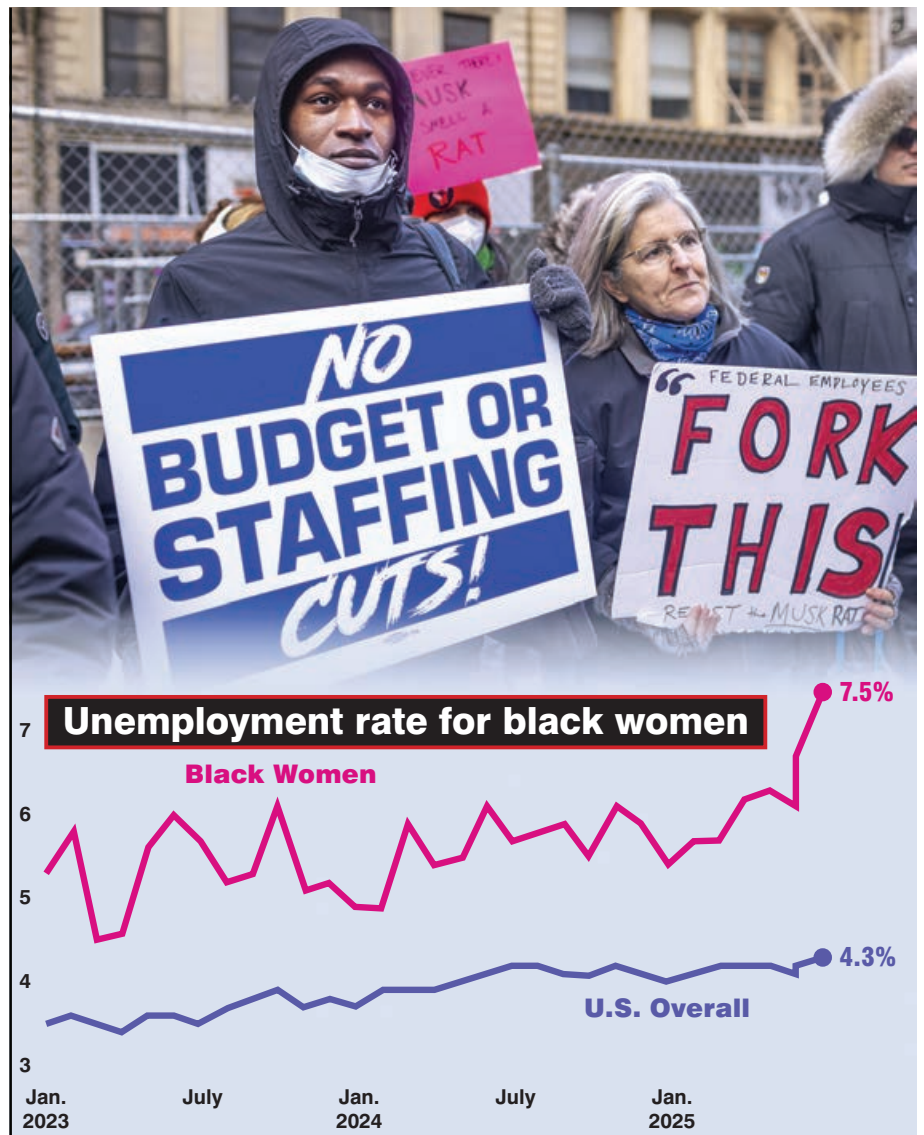
DEI: Moral Crusade Ignites Witchhunt

Labor Must Oppose Racist Purges

Last year, Trump rode back into office, guns blazing, aiming to take down this country's previous liberal status quo. The ruling class could no longer afford the cost of maintaining appearances to mask its oppressive ways and had anointed him to lay down the law. Chief among his targets right out of the gate was "diversity, equity and inclusion" aka DEI. On Day One, Trump signed an executive order banning DEI in federal agencies. On Day Two, he revoked LBJ's 1965 executive order mandating "equal opportunity" for black people in the recruitment, hiring and training of federal contractors, referring to it as "illegal DEI." And Trump was only getting started.

With tremendous speed, he moved not only to bulldoze DEI in every corner of society, but also to make the very words "diversity, equity and inclusion" taboo. In a high-profile showdown, he beat the DEI right out of Columbia University and other educational institutions by swinging the club of financial blackmail. Law firms, facing the loss of security clearances and federal contracts, also fell in line. Corporate America did not require much convincing at all to significantly scale back their initiatives or scrap them altogether—the time for "wokeness" had come and gone. Today, DEI programs are far fewer and further between.

The racist reactionary in the White House has waged his war against DEI with such intensity that a casual observer might believe that these initiatives were somehow fundamentally transforming the country's landscape in favor of black people. Hardly. While DEI programs often look different from workplace to workplace, most have featured some combination of employee resource groups, "cultural awareness" training and hiring



Nigro/Pacific Press; Chart data: Bureau of Labor Statistics
New York, 19 February 2025: Protest against Trump administration attack on federal unions, services and mass layoffs. Black women have borne brunt of DEI purges and attacks on federal workers.



Hookstein/Washington Post

At the height of the BLM movement protesters tore down and burned statue of Confederate General Albert Pike in Washington, D.C., June 2020. Last October, National Park Service reinstalled it.

targets. The main focus of DEI departments is to push liberal values, while internally set goals for hiring and promotion of women and minorities were almost never met. Very few black people have received any tangible benefit from DEI outside a thin layer of professionals who got access to jobs that otherwise might not have been available to them—and DEI has clearly done nothing to reduce rampant discrimination in society.

Slamming this barely cracked door shut on black professionals would be bad enough. But Trump's anti-DEI witch-hunt has assumed far greater dimensions as a widespread, all-around racist purge throwing back black people and dragging down the working class too. The closure of federal DEI offices and layoff of their staff were the opening salvo in an ongoing offensive against the government workforce that claimed some 300,000 jobs last year. Tolerating no opposition, the Trump administration at the outset threatened federal employees with "adverse consequences" if they failed to snitch on colleagues who defended DEI.

In response to the DEI ban and early DOGE cuts, the leadership of federal employee unions like the AFGE filed suit in court. Not missing a beat, Trump gave them a taste of the bare-knuckle tactics of a true class warrior and voided the union contracts by executive fiat. True to form, the labor statesmen rushed to bring more litigation rather than do anything to show Trump that he was not the only one who could disrupt business as usual in the corridors of power.

Black women have borne the brunt of the DEI purge and attacks on federal workers. They have also suffered the failure of union leaders in both the public and private sector to meet the moment. Over the course of last year, black women suffered

a sharp rise in unemployment, at levels unknown among white women since the Great Recession. The reactionaries have successfully twisted DEI ("Didn't Earn It") to cast a long shadow over the qualifications and accomplishments of black people, especially black women, freezing many out of the job market.

Trump has kept right on kicking black people down every chance he gets. His MAGA cronies find the DEI bogeyman lurking behind every disaster resulting from the decay of this society and the negligence of its ruling class: the mid-air collision over the Potomac, the L.A. wildfires, the Baltimore bridge collapse. References to historic black figures, like Harriet Tubman, Jackie Robinson and the Tuskegee Airmen, were scrubbed for a time from government websites as casualties of the DEI war. At the same time, the Commander-in-Chief has ordered the restoration of Confederate statues and has taken the Smithsonian to task for supposedly focusing too much on "how bad Slavery was." To top it off, he leveraged the dismantling of DEI programs into the dismantling, agency by agency, of the federal government's civil rights enforcement infrastructure dating back to the 1960s.

All this is clearly bad news for black people, whether or not they ever participated in DEI programs. The forces of racist reaction are swarming all around, and things can easily go from bad to worse very quickly. Something must be done to hold the line on behalf of the black masses—and running to the courts ain't it. Rulings that did not go Trump's way have proved little more than small bumps in the road that he just goes right around and keeps on steamrolling.

But the unions themselves could be a roadblock to this reaction. They have both social weight and a real interest in stop-

ping the racist purge dead in its tracks. Trump's success in throwing black people out of jobs and forcing them into retreat has only made it easier for him and the bosses to turn the screws on all other workers. This is true even when the jobs in question are, in the first instance, professional or managerial. The purge, well underway, is obviously not confined just to the top but extends throughout society. The attacks on DEI have not left labor unscathed either, beginning with the federal employee unions but not limited to them. For example, legislation adopted last year to ban DEI from Ohio colleges and universities also prohibits faculty strikes.

Labor has much to gain from fighting against every aspect of the reactionary assault on DEI. Doing so would be a means not only to relieve some of the pressure on its own neck, but also to cement a fighting alliance with the black community against the common enemy. But a simple defense of the remnants of DEI or a push for its revival is not going to get the job done because this would be toxic to the unity of the working class and oppressed that is urgently needed to beat back the Trump juggernaut. To get anywhere, this fight must strive instead to break down all barriers to the advancement of black people in a way that brings all other workers up too.

DEI: An Invitation to a Backlash

DEI is premised on the wrong view that racial oppression stems from the moral failings of individuals, rather than the material interests of the ruling class (see page 15). It is also stamped by the timing of its birth—the period marked by growing cracks in U.S. imperialism's global dominance. As a result, DEI is largely performance art. The bosses make a show of caring about women, black people and other minorities and subject their employees to training sessions about how race works, all the better to create the illusion of progress despite their refusal to provide decent wages and benefits, much less the promised opportunities for the "underrepresented."

Obama first institutionalized DEI in the federal government. He entered office in the early days of the Great Recession and dedicated himself to saving the banks and industry from collapse. His success came at the expense of the working class and black people, who lost their homes and jobs in droves. Recognizing that he was sitting on a powder keg, the first black president advised the Wall Street vultures: "My administration is the only thing standing between you and the pitchforks." The discontent ran deep, as the much-touted corporate recovery two years on had not trickled down to workers, whose jobs were



Glanzman/Bloomberg



Radin/ZUMA

Boston, 2018: Right-wing rally lauding “meritocracy” against Harvard’s admissions practices which consider race (left). Al Sharpton leads “March on Wall Street” to protest Trump’s attacks on DEI, August 2025 (right).

increasingly temp, part-time and low-tier if they had a job at all. There was little positive to point to when Obama issued his 2011 “Diversity and Inclusion” executive order for the federal workforce.

The less the liberals had to offer materially to the working class, the more they resorted to grand “woke” gestures like DEI. They had no way to retain their hold on the reins of power other than to cry crocodile tears for the oppressed and beat their gums about DEI to distract from the worsening conditions of the vast majority of the population. Under Biden, this most token of measures flourished all the more as the overall economic picture darkened for working people, propelling a massive backlash that shook the old liberal order to its foundations.

DEI mushroomed in corporate settings after the murder of George Floyd and outbreak of mass BLM protests. DEI was convenient window-dressing that corporations soon made highly profitable. It allowed the bosses to pat themselves on the back and score points for nothing more than promoting a woman or a person of color. It also let them off the

hook and shifted blame for inequality and discrimination onto white workers, especially white men, who were scolded for their privilege and “unconscious bias.” “Chief diversity officers” were hired for PR purposes, but nothing of substance was done to improve conditions for black people or women or any other group of workers on the job.

The Biden presidency was the perfect storm. On the one hand, his policies fueled rampant inflation that clobbered workers of all races and ethnicities. On the other, he frequently saluted his own DEI credentials, promising in advance to promote black and women candidates to high government posts. And he did so in record numbers. This played right into Trump’s hands. The potent brew of economic strangulation and perceived “reverse discrimination” made Trump attractive to many.

Hiring targets added to the explosive mix. Blocking off a certain share of a limited pool of jobs for one group to the exclusion of all others is an invitation to a backlash, especially when the overall economic pie is shrinking. And it was

shrinking before everyone’s eyes. The predictable outcome was to inflame racial divisions and pit white and black working people against one another. All the while, the ruling class, which is truly and solely responsible for keeping black people down, gets away with murder. Their very rule is based on the forcible segregation of the black masses as a powerful instrument to weaken the working class and drive down its conditions.

The cost of DEI is certainly not worth the measly benefits it has provided, including for the lucky few who received jobs or promotions under its umbrella, because now an inescapable cloud of doubt surrounds black people and their abilities. They always had to work two, three, four times as hard as everyone else to “prove” they belonged. Now it’s even worse.

Trump regularly denounces DEI as the main obstacle to purely merit-based hiring. This, of course, is total fantasy. Employers never hired based on merit alone before DEI and will not do so after it is gone. Trump, as a businessman with more than a few employees, is well aware of this. But he is playing to the grievances of white men, partly in an attempt to distract from his own inability to corral the cost of living despite his campaign pledge to put the brakes on inflation the moment he returned to the White House.

The administration has gone to great lengths to paint DEI as discriminatory toward white people, whom Trump judges to have been “very badly treated” ever since the civil rights movement. He has even put the remaining government civil rights enforcement infrastructure at their disposal to pursue “reverse discrimination” suits against liberal figures and institutions. Notably, in December the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission publicly solicited white men to file such claims. The liberals are horrified that

WORKERS VANGUARD

Marxist Working-Class Newspaper
of the Spartacist League/U.S.

\$10/6 issues
(includes English-language
Spartacist and *Black History*
& the Class Struggle)

Make checks payable/mail to:
Spartacist Publishing Co.
Box 1377 GPO
New York, NY 10116

workersvanguard.org



WORKERS VANGUARD

No. 1088

SP

December 2025

U.S. Workers: Stand with Venezuela!

The United States has been the leading cause of Venezuela's economic collapse. The U.S. has imposed a series of economic sanctions that have led to the death of thousands of Venezuelans. The U.S. has also been the leading cause of the displacement of millions of Venezuelans. The U.S. has been the leading cause of the destruction of Venezuela's infrastructure. The U.S. has been the leading cause of the destruction of Venezuela's environment. The U.S. has been the leading cause of the destruction of Venezuela's culture. The U.S. has been the leading cause of the destruction of Venezuela's history. The U.S. has been the leading cause of the destruction of Venezuela's future.





Workers Vanguard

NYSNA picket at Montefiore hospital on January 14 in largest nurses strike in NYC history. Extending the strike to other hospital unions in integrated class struggle can challenge bosses' divide-and-rule, strengthening unions.

Trump has turned their apparatus against them. They present the federal government as the main instrument to defend black rights. But its main role has been to help liberal leaders contain and derail the black struggle.

Working-Class Unity Across the Color Line

Although the Democrats were prime movers behind DEI, they have offered no defense outside of court challenges to Trump's hammer blows against it. In fact, they were quick to drop any semblance of concern for black people and other oppressed groups after Trump's electoral victory. They most certainly are not going to reignite the black struggle.

Some liberal forces have initiated consumer boycotts of corporations, like Target, which rolled back their DEI programs. These have accomplished little to nothing, aside from possibly contributing to CEO turnover at Target. What would actually make a difference to the status of black workers at the retailer would be a campaign to unionize them. This would be a means to win higher pay, better benefits, job security and greater protections against discrimination. More gen-

erally, a large-scale unionization drive across industry is a surefire way to put both white workers and black people on firmer footing to defend themselves and fight for advances on the job and in society. Appeals to the bosses to "do the right thing" just leave them in the driver's seat to do as they see fit.

Instead, the unions need to step out front to fight against the unfolding racist purge. To make that happen will require struggle within the unions themselves. All too often, their leadership pushes token liberal schemes like DEI in partnership with the bosses to claim commitment to black equality, rather than mobilize the membership to fight for it in the concrete *against* the bosses so as to bridge racial divisions and strengthen the unions and their struggles.

This is true in the private sector as well as the public. For example, the UAW-Ford National Joint DEI Committee had operated for some years prior to the 2023 auto strike, in which Shawn Fain refused to explicitly raise anything to combat racial oppression. And so, a golden opportunity was squandered. Black Detroit could have been galvanized behind the union and a real blow landed on behalf of auto work-

ers and the black population. Instead, the strike ended without winning anything of enduring value.

Bringing the unions forward will only be possible if white workers recognize that the defense of their own quality of life requires defense of black people under attack. Throwing a bunch of black people out of work is not going to make things easier for white workers or create more opportunities for them. It will just give the bosses an even stronger whip hand to crack away at conditions on the job and set the terms of exploitation—and further embolden Trump to attack the unions.

If labor fails to take a stand against the racist purge, it will only reinforce the view among black people that white workers will never fight for them. This would just compound the problem, because white workers are crucial potential allies in the black struggle. Their numbers would provide indispensable additional leverage against the ruling class.

To forge working-class unity across the color line all forms of liberal shaming must be rejected. We cannot keep falling prey to liberal divide-and-conquer in a struggle over the bosses' scraps. The unions must fight for jobs for all, control of hiring and training and the full equality of black people on the job and in every other respect.

Despite the upward mobility of a small layer of the black petty bourgeoisie, daily life for the masses remains defined by poverty and racial oppression. This will only change by toppling the walls of segregation, and putting the wealth of society to work for us. As long as the parasitic ruling class calls the shots, it will fight tooth and nail to stop us. In order to defeat this behemoth and get the things we all need, the fight for black equality must be fused to the fight for workers power. ■



AN ORGAN OF REVOLUTIONARY MARXISM

Published in Chinese, English, French, German, Greek and Spanish and included in all subscriptions to ICL press in those languages.

spartacist.org

spartacist.org/en/70



Reprinted from Workers Vanguard supplement, 22 September 2025

Kirk Still Needs to Be Proved Wrong

The fallout from the assassination of reactionary ideologue Charlie Kirk has only just begun. However, one thing is clear: The initial celebrations on social media were beyond dim, as an already bad situation is quickly becoming far worse. We certainly will not mourn his absence, but he should not have been killed.

Now, the right—both here and internationally—has a martyr. Trump and his advisors wasted no time in calling for vengeance against the left. Everyone from MAGA activists to bona fide fascists has picked up this rallying cry. The day after Kirk's death, a number of historically black colleges were locked down in the face of physical threats. A severe crack-down is in the making against anyone perceived to be standing in the way of the Trump agenda—not least workers across the political spectrum protesting against their miserable conditions.

Individual terror is never the road forward and always invites greater state repression. But in some cases, like this one, it greatly amplifies the country's partisan polarization and will only bring disaster for the oppressed. In contrast, the killing of the UnitedHealthcare CEO late last year struck a chord across the political spectrum and for good reason. As the head of a parasitic outfit that had denied lifesaving healthcare to millions, he was drenched in blood. The same could not be said of Kirk, who made a name for himself by skewering liberals in college campus debates.

Kirk was smugly confident in his arguments, especially when the liberals just wanted to denounce him as racist, transphobic, etc. While the epithets were accurate, this attempted shaming did nothing to prove Kirk wrong nor to diminish his appeal. These exchanges were symbolic of the current political terrain. The previous liberal status quo, having outlived its usefulness to the ruling class, is dead and gone; and the right is firmly in command. The opponents of Kirk by and large see no other option than to resort to acts of desperation. His assassination was just that and in its own way, the logical extension



Gage Skidmore

April 2022: Charlie Kirk (seated) debating with University of California, Berkeley students during his "Educate, Don't Mandate" campus tour.

of cancel culture, which seeks to silence rather than refute opposing viewpoints. And it, like the liberals' empty moral exhortations, is if anything solidifying support for Kirk's repugnant views.

A sure sign of the liberals' inability to answer Kirk was and still is their commonly branding him a fascist. Kirk was not the head of a murderous gang—i.e., a fascist organization—which the ruling class falls back on when it can no longer afford political debate. These shock troops of reaction must be decisively crushed, including through armed self-defense when necessary. But that does not describe Kirk's Turning Point USA (TPUSA), a fast-growing, mainstream conservative youth movement on campuses across the country. Its program is unmistakably reactionary, but Kirk was not recruiting students to kill leftists and minorities or physically break up unions. Rather, he peddled backward ideas that *must be exposed and politically defeated*.

An Actual Working-Class Answer

Kirk's arguments still need to be answered. The liberals, who view social problems as fundamentally moral in

nature, have not been able to. They just got tied in knots and ended up denying reality. To date, the Marxist left has not done any better, in large part because they have long embraced the liberal framework. So, let's turn this around and start unpacking some of the more controversial things Kirk said:

"If we would have said that Joy Reid and Michelle Obama and Sheila Jackson Lee and Ketanji Brown Jackson were affirmative action picks, we would have been called racist. But now they're coming out and they're saying it for us...they're saying I'm only here because of affirmative action. Yeah, we know. You do not have the brain processing power to otherwise be taken really seriously. You had to go steal a white person's slot" (The Charlie Kirk Show podcast, 13 July 2024).

This gem has been widely cited since Kirk's death. The typical exchange over it follows a familiar pattern. Liberal: Kirk was a racist who smeared black women as lacking brain processing power. Right-



Applewhite/AP

October 2022: Liberal activists protest outside Supreme Court during oral arguments in cases that ended affirmative action in college admissions, Washington, D.C.

winger (see Vice President JD Vance while hosting Kirk's podcast from the White House): No, he did not say that; he was talking about those four particular black women. Liberal: Well, Kirk is a racist for insulting the intelligence of those four black women, and Vance is a racist for defending him. And so, the liberals make themselves feel good, while the right promises to unleash all hell on them—and no light is shed on anything.

On one level, it is not so hard to poke holes in Kirk's argument. Slots, whether at an elite university or a high-profile job, have never been rewarded exclusively or even primarily based on brain processing power. Nepotism and money loom rather large here. Countless white people fill positions they did not earn other than by the accident of birth. Furthermore, as most any worker can attest, managers usually do not know even half of what it takes to get the job done right, but they bark orders and throw their weight around like they have something real to contribute. And there are plenty of politicians on both sides of the aisle, federal judges of different political bents and talking heads on Fox News and MSNBC alike who are far from the brightest bulbs.

But these observations only scratch the surface, and we would do well to delve deeper. Kirk is not just targeting four random black women, but rather members of the black elite whose interests and outlook are far removed from the black masses. And they are not just four random members of the black elite, but rather strong defenders of the old liberal order, which draped itself in noble ideals as white and all other workers (including most black people) got economically pounded.

The election of Barack Obama (which Reid had a hand in as his 2008 campaign press secretary) was supposed to bring "hope and change" and signal the country's near-complete transformation into a post-racial society. Instead, it just made a black man the overseer of the plantation. The Obama administration focused all its energy on digging the bankers and bosses out of major financial crisis at the expense of workers—and black people were the first to be thrown out of their homes and jobs.

The less the liberals had to offer materially to workers and the poor, the more they leaned into grand "woke" gestures to cling to power. So, Biden made a 2020 campaign promise to appoint the first black woman Supreme Court justice—and he later picked Jackson to great fanfare from the White House, while most were choking on the rampant inflation he had stoked. Lee was a staunch ally of both Biden and Obama. In short, these four black women played a forward role on behalf of a wing of the ruling class that was keeping the bulk of the population down—not least black people. These are not success stories to cheer about.

At the time of the Supreme Court's ban on race-based affirmative action in university admissions (when Kirk made the above comment), the first three spoke publicly in defense of such programs as past beneficiaries, and Jackson issued a strongly worded dissent to the ban. Here is the fundamental problem: Liberal affirmative action initiatives, implemented in the name of righting historic crimes, can do nothing of the sort. But they were guaranteed to create tensions that explode into a full-scale backlash against the histori-

cally oppressed population, especially in a stagnating society.

How so? In the context of a fixed number of openings at a university, to give preference for a slot to a black student is to disadvantage white and other non-black candidates. The same goes in the case of DEI efforts in hiring practices. Under the pressures of a sinking economy, this competition, especially for more prized positions, was bound to heat up and boil over. To top it off, these token measures were always just lipstick on the ugly face of segregated America. They gave a bit of a boost to the relatively small black middle class amid deepening segregation in housing, education and other areas. From the standpoint of the ruling class, affirmative action and DEI were ways to bask in the glow of diversity, all the better to maintain the muck of racial oppression and keep the working class divided—up until it recently decided to toss aside the liberal cover altogether.

Kirk was playing to the swindle at the heart of affirmative action and DEI. The liberals expect white working people to just swallow shrinking opportunities for themselves out of moral obligation to others. But he did so in order to falsely conclude that there are no barriers whatsoever to the advancement of black people in the U.S. today other than their supposed "victim mentality" and what he described as cultural problems like absentee fathers. On the latter point, he shared a certain convergence with Obama; and Kirk was also fond of presenting the U.S. as post-racial. So, while the liberals blame white youth and workers ("white privilege") for black people's wretched conditions, Kirk blamed black people themselves for the same and for holding back white youth and workers in the process. In both cases, white and black working people are pitted against one another, and the one sector of society truly responsible for the degraded status of black America, the squeezing of white workers and the bleak prospects for the younger generations—the ruling class that calls the shots—is let off the hook. In fact, they forcibly segregate black people at the bottom to better be able to set workers at one another's throats and lower the standards of what conditions pass as acceptable for white workers.

There is a way out of this cycle: to fight for more decent-paying jobs and better conditions for all and to throw open the doors of the top universities. These things will have to be fought for in opposition to both the liberals and to Trump, who is busy exploring new ways to shore up the bosses' position by stampeding most everyone else. And winning that fight is going to require assembling the strongest

possible force based on unity against the common enemy. White workers will take up the black struggle not out of moral obligation, but to advance their own material interests; and black people will join together with white workers not out of blind trust, but to make headway against their segregation.

"There was evil, it [Jim Crow] was terrible, but black Americans are poorer today in 2024 than they were in the 1950s" (Kirk, Jubilee "Surrounded," 8 September 2024).

Kirk always played fast and loose with the facts to further his narrative, while holding on to some element of truth to fend off charges of lying. Here was one such case, designed to really provoke the liberals. While technically black people are not poorer today than at that time, the persistence of deep poverty in the black inner cities and rural areas is evident to all—and he would ask why, despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act and other "anti-racist laws"?

This question was a frontal challenge to the liberal view of the civil rights movement. In response, the liberals fell back on calling him a racist for defending Jim Crow (when he did not) or his own "blame the victim" answer. But they would not go anywhere near the uncomfortable truth: The liberal-led civil rights movement was geared not toward fulfilling the aspirations of the black masses, but toward opening the door for the black elite. So, its gains were limited to formal democratic rights, even while the fundamental conditions of life—particularly in the key areas of employment, wages, housing and education—worsened for the vast majority of the black population. Segregation is a matter of forcibly keeping the black masses at the bottom of society—and Jim Crow was just one mechanism for that.

In the face of mass social struggle, the ruling class could let go of legal segregation, because doing so gave it a much-needed image boost on the international stage, without requiring it to relax the boot on black people's neck. But the ruling class is never going to let the black masses just get up off the ground—which would be throwing away its greatest weapon for weakening the working class as a whole. That's why the liberal movement was stopped dead in its tracks when it went North after the dismantling of Jim Crow in the South and the passage of "anti-racist" laws like the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The civil rights movement could not redress segregation in those fundamental conditions of life so long as liberal leadership bound the struggle hand-and-foot



Chicago, 1966: Liberal civil rights movement led by MLK (kneeling, left) hit brick wall when confronting hellish conditions of Northern ghettos. Black oppression is not just a matter of bad ideas, as liberals contend, but is materially rooted in society, serving capitalist interests. AP

to a wing of the ruling class. To this day, black people remain at the bottom in all four key areas and more.

To change this situation will require an actual clash with ruling-class interests, not a change in what is in people's heads, whether through liberal privilege-checking or Kirk's "family values." On this score, the declining status of the labor movement since the 1950s looms large in the inability of black people to break out of poverty. The unions, under their own liberal leadership, have gone through a lengthy period of defeat and stagnation, going back to the early 1980s when attacks on the civil rights movement's limited gains picked up steam. This is no accident: white workers will never be able to rise significantly higher than the bottom layer of the class due to the downward pressure of its conditions. The unions must be strengthened to pursue the collective defense of all workers—crucially by putting the cause of black equality front and center.

*"Blacks commit more crimes than whites do, they commit more murders, they commit more arsons, they commit more kidnappings...that's not a war on drugs that's a culture problem.... Why are so many blacks committing murders outside of their population?" (Kirk, *ibid.*)*

Current statistics show that black people committed more murders, but not more crime overall. It is also a fact that most of these killings have been black-on-black crimes. Here is another case where Kirk both exaggerated to push reactionary conclusions but touched on a real social problem that the liberals look to duck. When the subject came up, they cried racist and

cited alternative statistics—knowing full well where he was going but coming off like reference to crime data unfavorable to black people necessarily feeds racism. Generally speaking, the liberals downplay the problem of black crime to pretend that nothing needs to be done. On occasion, some pointed to socioeconomic factors, like grinding poverty and poor schools, only to fall into silence when Kirk argued that these same conditions prevailed in the 1940s.

To begin, the national context was very different then versus now. In the '40s, the U.S. ruling class was at its high point coming out of World War II, and its industrial base stood head and shoulders above all others. Jobs were available for black youth to fill at the lowest rungs, and the country's rulers had such a vast social surplus that they could readily afford to establish a safety net for the poor to head off social unrest. Today, deindustrialization and a war on labor have made good jobs very hard to come by, and that safety net has been repeatedly cut back amid ruling-class concern that the cost is no longer worth it. In the intervening period, the policing of black neighborhoods has greatly intensified. Under this reign of terror, the cops round up and arrest every black person they can.

Many black people have to live under intolerable conditions—the worst housing, healthcare and schools among other things. They are trapped in impoverished, segregated neighborhoods and have minimal opportunity to get by, much less to get out. These circumstances are a breeding ground for anti-social behavior. This is not a matter of bad culture, but of desperation to survive. The answer is not, as liberals sometimes propose, either social work or more cops, who will always make any situation worse. Nor is it a transfor-



Workers Vanguard

Spartacus Youth League at April 1978 protest against Supreme Court's racist Bakke decision, which banned quotas in education.

mation in values, which hold little to no meaning when food is not on the table or a roof is not over one's head. Rather, it is to provide more of the basic necessities to the black population—not by taking money and resources away from white workers, but by taking money and resources away from the ruling class, whose grip on society and its wealth creates catastrophe.

■ *"What is a woman?" (Kirk, *ibid.*)*

Kirk would give a strictly biological definition and lob the question at liberals, whose identity politics unplugs them entirely from reality. For example, one liberal who obviously would be perceived as a man by society insisted: "If I decided right now that I wanted to identify as a woman, I would be a woman." Far from rallying defense of trans people, such claims so obviously at odds with the real world just turn off workers who know a whole lot better than that. "If I decided right now that I wanted to identify as a boss, I would be a boss." Right.

For Kirk, a woman is defined strictly according to physical attributes, like chromosomes and reproductive organs. Of course, it is ridiculous to argue that having a womb has no connection whatsoever to womanhood. That said, simple biology and the ability to bear children cannot give any insight into what it means to be a woman in society, which has expectations for how women are to act, speak, dress, groom and conduct themselves, the jobs they are to perform and much more. Kirk's definition of a woman reflects his political objective: to get society to shun trans people as pariahs and reinforce gen-

der norms in the straitjacket of the patriarchal family.

In contrast, the liberals want to gain social acceptance of the right to transition between genders, only they go about it all wrong and in a way that is guaranteed to backfire. While Kirk conflated the biological and social significance of being a woman, they define womanhood as what somebody wills it to be at any given moment. This is clearly wrong in terms of biology. In an attempt to explain this away, the liberals argue that sex is not a binary (male and female), but bimodal (a spectrum with two main clusters). This dismissal of the binary as pure invention only makes it more difficult to deal with the complexities of the physical and social worlds, beginning with the rather obvious biological foundations of womanhood. Recognition of the opposite sexes in and of itself does not preclude variations, the exceptions to the rule.

The liberal claim that being a woman is simply a matter of what is inside one's head is also wrong in terms of society, which has deeply engrained gender norms rooted in major institutions, like the family. Just because womanhood is a social construct does not mean that an individual can freely determine what a woman is. Self-identifying as a particular gender does not guarantee social acceptance of that identity. Nobody knows how difficult it is to transition better than trans people themselves. At the end of the day, the breaking down of gender norms is a matter of changing society, not changing identities. The liberal focus on identity can only result in failure to combat trans oppression by isolating the movement from society.

Trans people gained a certain degree of approval in the final years of the liberal order, as the country's rulers scrambled to give the appearance of social progress to distract from their incapacity to provide anything of material value. And that "progressive" veneer was torn off as soon as it no longer suited the ruling class.

To halt the current onslaught and actually get somewhere, the trans struggle must be linked to the struggle of the working class, which has an objective interest in ushering in a new society. The way to do so is not by telling workers that they must embrace all gender expressions, but by showing them that fighting in defense of trans people is actually to their benefit, that the attacks on trans rights are a precursor to the stripping away of the rights of the working class as a whole and that trans people and workers uniting together to defend themselves can only put both groups on a stronger footing. This is urgently necessary at a time when Trump is taking every opportunity to go after trans people and workers alike.

The left's failure to counterpose real materialist arguments—in direct opposition to both the liberals and the right—has repelled workers from it en masse. Only by linking the struggles for workers' interests to the defense of the oppressed can we ensure the unity of our class and rally the forces necessary to withstand the looming attacks. Let the liberals discredit themselves by denying and dismissing workers' worries with empty moral arguments, and make clear that the left has a program to fight both wings of the ruling class. This is the only way to build a class-struggle movement to counter the attraction of reactionaries like Kirk or of the desperate lone-wolf approach. ■

A Spartacist Publication

Women & Revolution
NUMBER 46
A SPARTACIST PUBLICATION
FEBRUARY 2025

Transgender Liberation

Liberal Betrayal

Marxist Answers

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No. 46, February 2025

A journal for women's liberation and social emancipation

iclf.org/wr/46

**South
Africa**

Defend Malema to Fight U.S. Imperialism



East London, South Africa: Class-struggle contingent at January 23 protest in defense of Julius Malema against legal vendetta ordered by Trump.

AmaBolshevik! Amnyama

Printed below is an edited speech by comrade Erica of the Spartacist League at the Partisan Defense Committee's January 24 Holiday Appeal for Class-War Prisoners in New York City. She talked about the need to defend Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema, who was recently convicted by a South African court on bogus charges for having allegedly fired a rifle in the air during a celebration in 2018. He could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.

Amandla! Awethu! Yesterday the South African government postponed the sentencing of EFF leader Julius Malema to April 15. This means the fight continues. We join in solidarity with our comrades in Spartacist/South Africa and fighters in the EFF in building support to defend Malema, to defend ourselves here in the belly of the beast too. The “Government of National Unity” (GNU) coalition—the ANC and the openly pro-imperialist and white-dominated Democratic Alliance—is going after Malema in order to prevent any resistance to the strangulation of the black masses. The GNU enforces this on behalf of Trump and the Randlords. Trump put a target on Malema’s back last year in that infamous White House visit with imperialist puppet Cyril Ramaphosa.

Why Malema and the EFF? The imperialists want to prevent the masses attracted to the EFF from trying to fight for libera-

tion from the racist Randlords and the neo-apartheid ANC government, which is responsible for a trail of broken promises and misery.

The black South African masses are hated by the U.S. ruling class because they want land, good jobs, adequate housing, basic services like electricity and control of the mines and other imperialist-owned property. That’s what is behind Trump’s instruction to Ramaphosa to get rid of Julius Malema: the imperialists want to eliminate any movement that even gestures toward fighting for the land and resources that rightly belong to the black people of South Africa. Hands off Malema and the EFF!

The end of apartheid in 1994 was supposed to mean real liberation, but the reality is massive unemployment, miserable living conditions and rampant exploitation of black and coloured workers. This is not so dissimilar to the aspirations for black liberation here. We were promised 40 acres and freedom following the Civil War, but instead got over a century and a half of racist capitalist oppression, segregation and massive state repression—with cops gunning down black and brown people with impunity.

Many black people in the U.S. feel a connection with black South Africans. There is a natural alliance. They both, along with the entire U.S. working class,

share a common enemy in U.S. imperialism. The imperialists are trying to do to Malema in South Africa what they’ve done to militant black political leaders here, like Mumia Abu-Jamal: lock them away or worse (see page 35).

Trump’s crushing and starvation of the black South African masses goes hand in hand with his attacks on immigrants and his assault on workers here, too. And the threat to this country’s black population is undeniable.

But both of the struggles, the struggle for the national liberation of black South Africans and the struggle for black liberation here, have something else in common. Both have been betrayed by leaders of the union movement and leftists who seek alliances with the capitalist rulers and their politicians. Here that expresses itself by trying to keep the struggle for black liberation confined to what is acceptable to the liberals and the Democratic Party. This has resulted in turning off many workers who have seen their livelihoods suffer at the hands of the Democrats and have turned to Trump. This has deepened divisions in the working class, especially along racial lines.

These polarizations help keep working people divided against themselves as Trump launches attacks on immigrants and the unions. Now that the liberal mask has been torn off, the true face

of racist U.S. imperialism again reveals itself, from the bombing of Venezuela and kidnapping of Maduro to the genocide in Palestine and attacks on Iran. U.S. imperialism is trying to force the world to line up behind its ambitions to maintain its world dominance. As the Mamdani administration works hand in hand with the healthcare bosses to freeze

out striking nurses here in NYC and the Trump administration sics ICE on protesters and immigrants alike, united-front class-struggle defense is posed now more than ever.

All of these fights that you will hear about today—the fight to free political prisoners, to defend Malema, to release Maduro, to rebuild the movement against

racist cop terror, to defend immigrants against ICE, to defend union workers on strike—show that the only way out of this mess is to bridge the divisions in the working class by appealing to the need for all those under attack to take a united stand against the common U.S. imperialist enemy. We have a lot of groups here. Talk to us after about how we can join forces. ■

Defend Malema, Defend South Africa Against Trump!

What Strategy Do We Need to Win?

We reprint below an article that appeared in the 23 January AmaBolshevik Amnyama supplement, publication of our comrades in Spartacist/South Africa.

AMABOLSHEVIKI AMNYAMA 

January 3rd showed the new world reality we live in. With his bombing of Venezuela and brazen abduction of Maduro and Flores, Trump sent a message loud and clear about what he intends to do with countries that refuse American dictates. Appeals to international law and the “rules-based order”, friendly ties with China: none of it is any deterrent if you can’t defend yourself.

This should be a wake-up call for South Africa, which has been high on Trump’s hit list since his return to the Oval Office. We must have no illusions: Trump *will* continue to press his relentless campaign of tariffs, sanctions and other attacks on the country. As one of the weaker BRICS+ member states, South Africa is seen as a soft target. By forcing a capitulation here, the US imperialists hope to isolate and indirectly weaken China—their main strategic target. (The 2025 round of tariff wars showed that as things stand, China is still too powerful for them to confront directly.)

In the face of this unmistakable threat, we hear more and more calls from leftists for some kind of anti-imperialist front. This is an important shift, reflecting at least a basic recognition that the left and

trade unions are very weak and divided, and that unity is needed to defend ourselves against US imperialism. That’s a necessary starting point, but from there we must still take the first steps of *building* an anti-imperialist movement that wins the support of the masses and guides them in an effective struggle. Here, two main obstacles still hold back most of the left.

The first obstacle is clear when we look at those who refuse to defend EFF leader Julius Malema against the legal vendetta ordered by Trump. Whether out of sectarianism, workerism or subordination to the ANC, these leftists flee from the first major battle line to defend South Africa against US imperialism, weakening the working class and ceding the anti-imperialist struggle to the nationalists. (The Open Letter “Why ALL Socialists and Trade Unions Have a Stake in Defending Julius Malema” is directed at combating this obstacle on the left.)

On the other hand, there are many on the left who see that whatever our political differences, we must not let them stand in the way of forming a united front to defend Malema. This is a good thing, and we seek to work together with these leftists to strengthen and broaden this united front, making it into a rallying point to fight US imperialism. But to do this we need to be honest about where we are at, including the political obstacles that also hold back this section of the left.

In terms of promoting an anti-

capitulationist line, the EFF is the overwhelmingly dominant pole on the left (it’s no accident they are in Trump’s cross-hairs). However, it must be recognised that their struggle against imperialism is based on a *parliamentarist-nationalist* strategy. Their main emphasis is on the courts, parliamentary committees and commissions of enquiry. When they do seek to mobilise the masses—and they do—it is in a way that politically subordinates the working class to a middle-class leadership that channels struggle along lines acceptable to the black elites. As we discuss below, this strategy holds us back from building an effective defence against Trump and reinforces paralysis in the face of his attacks.

Against this, the task of revolutionaries is to fight to push the movement forward along *class-struggle* lines—ones that unite the toilers and oppressed against US imperialism, combining defence of national sovereignty with defending the masses and attacking the interests of the ruling class. Through this struggle, we must build a Bolshevik pole that competes for leadership. The main lesson from the anti-apartheid struggle is that when communists cede leadership of the national-democratic struggle to petty-bourgeois nationalists, no matter how radical, it inevitably leads to conciliation of imperialism.

To be sure, the forces of the Bolshevik pole are quite weak and disorganised today. To begin addressing this, let’s look

at two key questions facing the movement today and why a class-struggle strategy is needed to answer them.

Will Ramaphosa Stand Up to Trump?

Keeping up with the Ramaphosa government's response to Trump is dizzying. One week they denounce US aggression, declaring, "South Africa won't be bullied, the White House cannot dictate our domestic and foreign policies." The next they do a U-turn, offering concessions (e.g. Malema's head on a platter) in the deluded hope that Trump will ease his pressure if they give in to some of his diktats. It's an incoherent mess that only manages to piss off everyone.

To make sense of their confusing balancing act, we must start from the role that Ramaphosa and the ANC tops play in the neo-apartheid order. It's not just that they are corrupt and spineless (they are). Above all, they are representatives of the black elites, who are simultaneously crushed by the white monopoly capitalists and utterly beholden to them. The white capitalists, in turn, are a Fifth Column for US imperialism—a bit more "refined" than Trump's open fans like AfriForum, but no less committed to keeping the country under the American boot. Trump's pressure is putting the squeeze on both sections of the South African elites, making the tension between them sharper and the government's gyrations more frantic.

The EFF leaders do of course denounce the ANC's spinelessness—at times quite powerfully, like when Ramaphosa and Co crawled for Trump in the White House last May. However, if we take a step back and look at things objectively, the overall picture is a balancing act similar to the ANC's but further to the left. On the one hand, they give voice to the deep anger of

the black masses who wish for a resolute stand against Trump. At the same time, the EFF's nationalist strategy is centred on trying to win the allegiance of disgruntled sections of the black elites and show them that the EFF can do a better job of defending their narrow interests. So whenever the government shifts its balance onto that foot—around the G20 summit in December, or immediately after Maduro's kidnapping—the EFF leadership falls into line behind Ramaphosa, pandering to the illusion that he will stand firm against Trump.

Since the 2024 elections, Ramaphosa and the GNU have drawn a consistent line against the EFF, a line which only gets sharper the more Trump bears down. Instead of a clear response, the EFF has answered with slogans and activity that pull in opposite directions. Radical slogans like "Year of the Pickets" and "class struggle against imperialism", which speak to Ground Forces who want a militant struggle to defend their party, have remained empty words with no serious mobilisation to back them up. In contrast, the real activity has been centred on showing up the EFF as a "responsible", purely parliamentary party and coalition-partner-in-waiting for the ANC. The end result of all these mixed signals is to confuse EFF members and reinforce the paralysis of the masses, undercutting the party's own defence and the struggle against American imperialism.

This must be fought! For EFF militants and others who want to break the paralysis, the task is to work together to forge an *anti-imperialist front to defend ourselves against Trump and the GNU*. The only way to get Trump to back off is by making the US imperialists feel the pain. Although militarily and economically South Africa is relatively weak, we



Marikana, 2023: Economic Freedom Fighters leader Julius Malema commemorates party founding in aftermath of 2012 ANC-led government massacre of miners.

are a major supplier of platinum group metals and other critical minerals which along with rare earths constitute a key pressure point for the American empire. To maximise the impact and forge unity against US imperialism, we must fight:

- Shut down delivery of SA coal to Israel!
- No collaboration with imperialism! US bases out of Africa!
- China: Stop the supply of rare earths to the American empire! For African-Chinese economic/military cooperation based on unity against US imperialism!

Fighting for any of these things means crossing the red lines of the Randlords. That is something Ramaphosa and Co will do everything they can to stop. *You can't fight Trump with the butchers of Marikana.*

How to Win the Workers?

The key to turning defence of Malema into a rallying point for a unified resistance to US imperialism is fusing it with the struggle to defend the masses against the enemy within—the Randlords and their GNU lackeys. Every success in defending the working class against the GNU will help strengthen and unify the forces of resistance to US aggression. And workers have a direct interest in Malema's defence: standing up to Trump will put them in a better position to defend themselves.

The working class has its back against the wall right now. Strike activity is at a low point and the trade-union movement is weak and fractured. There is a widespread feeling of helplessness in the face of the combined onslaught of Trump's



Freeman/Getty

May 21: Trump browbeats South African president Ramaphosa during White House visit, part of U.S. imperialism cracking the whip to get Global South to fall in line.



Melbourne, January 23: PDC and others protest against imperialist-backed legal assault against Julius Malema and EFF. Right: United-front protest flyer calling on South African trade unions to join class-struggle contingent at Malema's hearing.

tariffs and GNU neoliberal austerity. On top of fear of falling victim to the jobs bloodbath, workers are bitter and demoralised from decades of betrayal by corrupt and spineless trade-union bureaucrats who have sapped the unions' power by using them as stepping stones to personal enrichment in ANC/government and corporate posts.

What should revolutionaries do in this tough situation? Many militants look at this mess and conclude that we must build new alternatives, particularly to COSATU unions. Although motivated by a just hatred of the leaders' crimes, this means turning your back on the base of these unions—the majority of organised workers in many industries and regions—and leaving them to the treacherous tops. This is no way to win the confidence of the more class-conscious workers, who know in their gut that even with a rotten leadership their union is still a bulwark against the racist bosses.

Instead of abandoning the existing unions—which also worsens the organisational divisions undermining workers' power—the task is to work within them to build a consistent opposition. We must fight to defeat the union bureaucracy from within and transform the unions into revolutionary mass organisations of the proletariat. (Needless to say, this has *nothing* in common with reversing the split of NUMSA and other unions from the Tripartite Alliance, as is now proposed by Irvin Jim.)

The fight to rebuild the trade-union movement must be waged hand in hand with revitalising the liberation struggle based on class-struggle leadership. Both movements have been systematically disorganised and hollowed out by decades of subordination to nationalist elites who rammed through austerity and anti-labour attacks dictated by white monopoly capital.

The task of the day is to organise and unify the *defensive* struggles, exposing

NUMSA & All Trade Unions: Defend Malema to Defend Yourself!

Donald Trump's American Empire is on the rampage. From Venezuela and Latin America to Africa, we have no choice: resistance to US imperialism is the only way to defend our national sovereignty, jobs and basic living conditions.

In SA, the first battle line is to overturn the October "guilty" verdict against EFF leader Julius Malema, which carries a possible 15-year prison sentence. Everyone knows that this pro-AfriForum ruling is not about Malema allegedly firing a gun into the air 7 years ago. It is the GNU's attempt to appease Trump, who demanded Malema's head from Ramaphosa & Co in the White House last May.

We cannot allow this! Whatever one may think of the EFF and its leader, this is an attack on every worker, leftist and liberation fighter. The EFF must not stand alone in fighting it. Trade unionists and all workers have a special interest in this struggle. Defending Malema is a first step in standing up against Trump's imperialist tariff war, which threatens the livelihoods of workers in auto, agriculture and many other industries.

All out on January 23rd! Join the class-struggle contingent at the EFF protest in East London. **Hands Off Malema! An Injury to One is an Injury to All!**

BE THERE!
East London Magistrate's Court
9:00 a.m., Friday, 23 January 2026

Socialist Party of Azania Solidarity Action Committees Collective

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ON THE QUESTION OF PREJUDICE

by Richard S. Fraser

The following is taken from a series of lectures given by Richard Fraser on "The Negro Struggle and the Proletarian Revolution" in 1953, reprinted in Prometheus Research Series No. 3. Fraser, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, made key contributions to understanding and combating racial oppression. Here he addresses the "Southern System" (Jim Crow), but his argument that it is the capitalist system, not prejudice, which is at the root of discrimination and segregation retains its validity today.

* * *

Now we must go over to the question of the nature of race prejudice and its role in the American system of race relations....

When applied to the Negro question, the theory of morality means that the root of the problem of discrimination and white supremacy is prejudice. This is the reigning theory of American liberalism and is the means by which the capitalists throw the responsibility for the Jim Crow system upon the population as a whole. If people weren't prejudiced there would be no Negro problem. This contention is fundamentally false.

The position in which the Negro people are placed in U.S. society is the direct result of the system of color slavery. Color prejudice under slavery resulted from the degraded position of the Negro. The Negro was virtually the entire southern working force and color prejudice reflected the degraded position of labor as a whole in society. The greatest humiliation that white men in the old South could undergo was being forced to do productive labor.

In this society before the Civil War, discrimination thus had the advantage of being appended to a peculiar and special mode of production in which servile labor appears natural, and is in fact the basic labor of society.

The Garrisonians claimed that slavery was only a moral question. And while their militant actions were in violation of this concept, they maintained that all that was necessary was to show that it was morally wrong and slavery would cease to exist. But the Garrisonians were wrong. Because slav-

ery was a matter of a social system, a mode of production, tremendous wealth amassed by its ruling class, and state power to protect it. They were also proven wrong by history, where war and revolution, not moral suasion, were necessary to end slavery.

Now, we know from a study of the history of capitalist development throughout the world that one of the important aspects of the emergence of capitalism is the creation

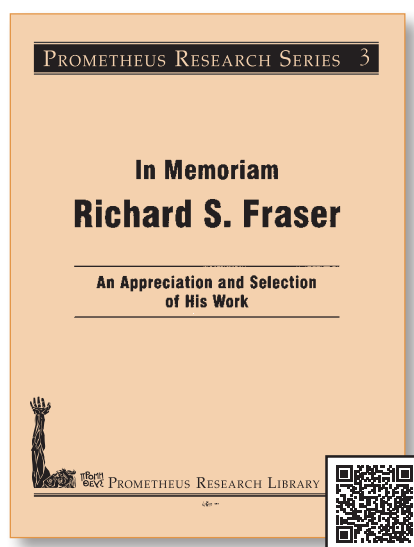
of the southern system are the great economic, political and social advantages which capitalism derives from color exploitation, and the advantages accruing to a small white middle class. The principal prop of this system of discrimination is segregation. Without segregation the racial division of American society is meaningless and withers away. Segregation is maintained basically not by prejudice but by force and violence and the legal structure of the South.

Prejudice is the product of this complex social relation. But although it is directed immediately against the Negro, its object is the working class as a whole. Through discrimination and segregation, Negro labor is degraded and its wage falls to the bare subsistence level. But this sets the pattern and controls the conditions of labor as a whole.

Color prejudice thus reflects both prejudice against labor as a whole and the degradation of the southern worker. In the South white labor is disfranchised along with Negro labor and the standard of living of the white sharecropper or factory hand is little better than that of the Negro.

Discrimination and prejudice in the rest of the United States derives directly from the southern system, feeds upon it, and like racial discrimination throughout the world is completely dependent upon it. The capitalist class adapts to its needs the fundamental features of the southern system. In every possible way it perpetuates the division of the working class by establishing throughout the entire nation the basic reciprocal relations between discrimination, segregation and prejudice which are so successful in the South....

But since discrimination in the North and West derives from the southern system, it will never be eliminated until the southern system is uprooted and destroyed. Similarly with prejudice. Education against prejudice has its importance in the Negro struggle. But only the destruction of the economic and social foundation upon which prejudice is built will eliminate it. This will be accomplished only by the socialist revolution. ■



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of the free labor market, where the laborer has nothing but his labor power to sell, and may go and come through the country in search of a buyer for this commodity.

However, the triumph of capitalism in the South brought not the free labor market, but the adaptation of the plantation system of color discrimination and compulsory labor to capitalist property relations. In this contradiction between the tendency of capitalism to operate with a free labor market and the reality of semi-slave labor, all the weird social relations and prejudices which originated under slavery were intensified by the victory of capitalism.

Prejudice is not the cause of discrimination, as the liberals claim, but is the product of the reciprocal relation between discrimination and segregation. At the



Left: MLK at August 1963 March on Washington. Center: President Barack Obama with Bill Clinton in 2010. Right: BLM electronic billboard in New York's Times Square. Linking black struggle to liberals is death knell of fight for black freedom.

Liberalism Destroyed the Black Struggle

How to Rebuild It

BY CAIRO TURNER

Trump is back in office promising to make life hell for the oppressed, and black people know they're in the crosshairs. Trump already struck down DEI. He's upped his war on crime, specifically targeting majority black cities like D.C. He bullied the South African president as a clear signal to black people in this country and abroad to stay in line. Yesterday, "diversity" and "cultural sensitivity" were the grand ideals to live up to. Today, the right has the upper hand and open racist reaction is mainstream. The "post-racial" society that was supposedly ushered in with Obama's election couldn't seem farther away.

With the rise of the right there has been an increasing backlash against the struggles of the oppressed. The liberal politicians that took a knee in kente cloths for BLM have dropped all pretense of fighting for black rights, deeming it divisive. Nearly every "progressive" politician and D.A. that was put in office on the back of BLM has been ousted and replaced with a "tough on crime" opponent. As for BLM itself, it is practically nonexistent compared to the heights it reached in 2020. Obviously, police brutality still runs rampant. But if there are protests, they are tiny and isolated. The Marxist left who were

once crawling all over BLM have mostly dropped all talk about black oppression, following the liberals' lead in leaving black people out in the cold.

We must defend ourselves from the reactionary onslaught. But in order to fight back we must understand what got us to this point. This article will show how liberalism has betrayed the black struggle and that the best way to advance the fight for black liberation is to be a communist. From the civil rights movement to today liberalism has channeled black anger into "lesser evil" electoral politics, limiting the struggle to what is acceptable to the oppressors. The liberal bourgeoisie pretends to care about black people to the extent that it serves their interests, but they defend the capitalist system built on black oppression. The liberals deliver moral platitudes while devastating the working class, which only breeds reaction. It is a myth that the arc of history will slowly and gradually result in black freedom. Today, the ruling class is tearing up most of the token gains that were once acceptable to them but now no longer correspond to their needs.

There must be a definitive break with and fight against the forces that hold black people in bondage—the U.S. ruling class.

Black liberation will require a struggle of the working class that cuts deep into the oppressor's profits and power. The whole history of the black struggle shows that these liberal shackles must be broken in order to forge a new path forward in the fight for black liberation.

1. The Source of Black Oppression

You must understand the source of black oppression if you want to fight it. If you know the Sparts, you've heard us often say that "black oppression is the bedrock of American capitalism," and that "the black question is the question of the American revolution." To understand these statements, we must look at the historical development of black oppression in the United States—a country whose entire economic system was built on the bloody backs of the black population.

In order to better extract profits out of the American colonies, the colonizers introduced chattel slavery. This system was economically useful to cultivate the vast amount of land in the "new world," particularly in the southern colonies. Africans were brought here in chains, ripped from their people and culture, and treated as property. Enslaving Africans specifi-

cally was useful to the masters. Many slaves did not speak a common language and their unfamiliarity with the new land made escape and rebellion difficult. Importantly, using African slaves allowed the ruling class to cultivate a racial divide in order to stop the oppressed masses from rebelling—it is still used to this day.

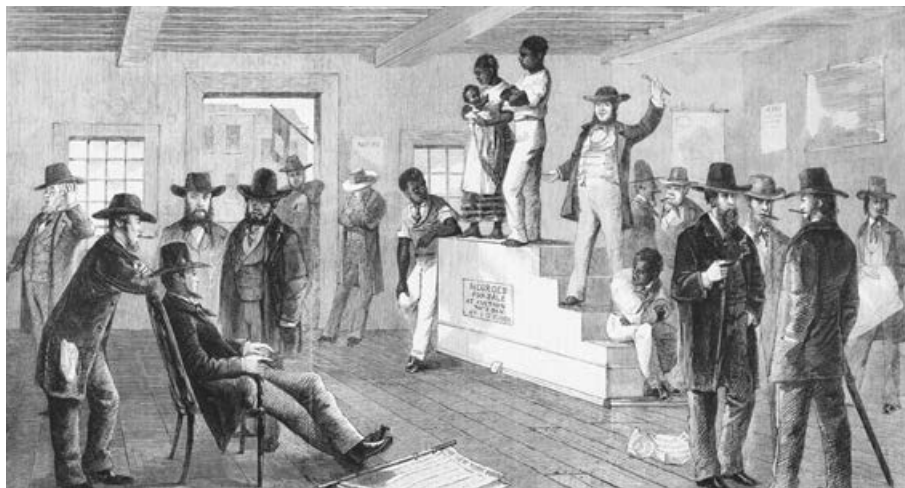
Slaves were identifiable by their skin color. In order to justify the barbaric system of slavery, black people were deemed inferior. Thus, the concept of race was born and with it the brutal system of white supremacy. Slavery had existed before, but it was the American system that introduced the justification of racial inferiority. This new paradigm, on which the slave trade was built, was profoundly profitable for both the colonial and European ruling classes for a very long time.

But conflicts started to emerge when a capitalist class started to develop. The needs of the budding industrial economy in the North were at odds with the agricultural slave economy of the South in terms of land, labor, economic policy, etc. The economic weight of the Southern slavocracy meant that the Northern capitalists were constantly thwarted and humiliated by the Southern plantation owners, who sought to protect their interests by expanding slavery to more states. The question at the heart of this irreconcilable class conflict, embodied in the Civil War, was: which system of production would rule?

The Civil War and Reconstruction were a turning point. The Civil War was a social revolution that smashed the slavocracy, abolished slavery, and ushered in the rule of Northern capital. To carry this out and secure their interests, the Northern capitalists made a temporary alliance with the slaves and abolitionists. This was the only time in American history that the interests of black people and the capitalist class remotely aligned.

What followed the Civil War was Reconstruction. To prevent a counterrevolution, the North sent troops, bolstered by armed black freedmen, to the South where they laid waste to the slavocracy and established black enfranchisement. This was a period where the new order was not yet consolidated and the system of racial oppression could have been truly ended.

But the capitalists, who had relied on former slaves to secure their victory, betrayed them. The measures taken during Radical Reconstruction were going to encroach upon their interests, and maintaining the system of racial oppression served them. Since they were already consolidating their national power, their alliance with the former slaves was no longer necessary. They pulled troops out of the South (to go crush a rail strike in



Illustrated London News

Illustration shows family for sale at slave auction in Virginia in 1861. Legacy of slavery forever disfigured American capitalist class rule.

the North), and thrust black people back into conditions similar to slavery.

This was the dawn of modern American capitalism—birthed from the betrayal of the black freedom struggle. It did not all happen because of bad ideas in white people's heads. Rather, at each step—from slavery, to the Civil War, to the betrayal of Reconstruction—these events were driven by the needs of the ruling class at the time, be it the Southern planters or the Northern capitalists. This is the root of black oppression.

The entire foundation of American capitalism is based on the disenfranchisement, segregation, and the brutal oppression of the black masses. It is the key source of strength and stability for the ruling class, and is used to undermine conditions of the entire working class. By adopting and perfecting the system of racial oppression from the South they kept black people in miserable conditions (paid less, last hired and first fired, segregated in dilapidated ghettos, randomly murdered by police, etc.). This degrades conditions throughout all of society. The bosses can force non-black workers to accept less or be replaced. And by pitting races against each other, the bosses ensure that there will be no united fight against them.

To improve the situation for black people, there must be a struggle against the interests of the capitalist class, who are the only ones who benefit from black oppression. Bettering conditions of black people will bring improvements for all, which is why the working class as a whole has a vested interest in fighting for black liberation. Black militants must consciously form an alliance with the working class (yes, even white workers) in order to build up the necessary force to smash the system that is directly responsible for their oppression.

Black people, while segregated at the bottom of society, are now integrated into the working class. This is what gives them exceptional leverage to bring down this racist imperialist system. To be successful, this fight must be linked to the liberation of the working class as a whole. But this has not been the dominant strategy of the black liberation struggle.

2. The Civil Rights Movement

We have established that the source of black oppression is capitalist class rule. With this in mind, we must now examine the history of black struggle in this country in order to understand its successes, limitations and defeats. This is the only way to effectively reorient and rebuild the struggle for black liberation today.

The natural place to start is the civil rights movement, which had quite contradictory results. On one hand it is regarded as the pinnacle of the black struggle that ended brutal Jim Crow segregation. Its leaders are looked back on with pride. At the same time, the movement that was supposed to usher in black equality... undeniably did not. Many black people still live in segregated neighborhoods with the worst schools and housing. Many struggle to get jobs, while others struggle to survive, permanently marginalized and chronically unemployed. All live in fear of police violence.

So, how was the civil rights movement able to get rid of Jim Crow, but unable to liberate the masses of black people from such horrible conditions? Right-wing demagogues, like Charlie Kirk (see page 7), chalk it up to something inherently wrong with the black family. Some black people say that it was wrong to fight for integration at all. Neither of these explanations actually addresses the real issue.

To understand this conundrum, we



Universal History Archive

Civil rights leaders with President Kennedy following March on Washington. John Lewis (center, back) was forced to remove criticism of the Democrats from his speech. NOI cartoon captures MLK's cringing pacifism that supported brutal repression of 1960s ghetto explosions.



Muhammad Speaks

must situate the civil rights movement in the international context of the time, and analyze the main political trends of the movement.

After World War II, the United States emerged as the world's superpower, rivaled only by the Soviet Union. At the time of the civil rights movement, the Cold War was in full swing. The U.S.'s main objectives were to stop the spread of communism and destroy the Soviet Union.

Because the U.S. was the "leader of the free world," the racist Jim Crow system was a matter of international concern. How could American democracy be a beacon for those struggling against Soviet oppression if the U.S. brutally discriminated against minorities at home? At a time when several African countries were gaining independence and the U.S. was competing with the Soviet Union for influence over them, Jim Crow was a bad look.

As for the black community at home, intolerance for the system was beginning to reach a boiling point. Black soldiers had been sent to fight and die during the war in segregated units. Having fought for "democracy" and "against prejudice," they came back to the brutality of Jim Crow and the reality of their second-class status. The hypocrisy was glaring and unbearable, and set the stage for the social explosion that occurred in the 1950s and '60s.

Martin Luther King Jr.

The movement against racial segregation was led by the black middle class and the clergy. The most prominent leader was Martin Luther King Jr., who is regarded as a national hero. King rose to prominence after the Montgomery bus boycott, and his program of "pacifist direct action" became the dominant trend of the movement and a model for subsequent struggle.

The whole conception of King's strategy was that racist whites and the U.S.

rulers would see how horribly black people were treated and then go, "You know what? I actually feel bad for these people. Let's stop their brutal oppression. We've finally seen the light." King's quote, "We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer," encapsulates this.

The international situation was making Jim Crow and black oppression in general a thorn in the side of the imperialists. Jim Crow absolutely needed to be smashed. But there was an opportunity to build a movement that could advance not only the fight for democratic rights but also for real material improvements. This would have required a broader and more direct confrontation with the bourgeoisie's interests. King had the power of a massive movement behind him but no interest in encroaching on the capitalist profit system. He kept the focus on passing civil rights bills by allying with sympathetic Democratic Party politicians. This lim-

ited the struggle against racial oppression to methods acceptable to the black petty bourgeoisie and the ruling class.

Take the March on Washington. Its purpose was to pressure the Kennedy administration to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. Marxists are not opposed to putting pressure on politicians, but purpose is important. The March was not intended to expose the liberal politicians who stood as obstacles to black freedom. John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was forced to remove criticisms of Kennedy or the government from his speech. The March tied the movement to the Democrats and sought to build support for politicians who had no intention of fighting for real integration. Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger was clear that the administration's focus would be the right to vote because it "did not incite social and sexual anxieties" in the way that integration did.



Boenzi/New York Times

National Guard in Newark represses 1967 ghetto upheaval. Poverty, unemployment and racist cop terror triggered ghetto upheavals in the North.

Malcolm X characterized the March best as the “Farce on Washington.” He saw the March, King, and the liberal civil rights movement as a valve for black people to release some steam while no substantive change occurred. Today, liberals try to present Malcolm X and King as two sides of the same coin, but this couldn’t be more false. Malcolm X hated King and correctly saw his liberal pacifism as an obstacle to the fight for black liberation.

The problem with the civil rights movement was not that it was trying to get rid of Jim Crow or that it was fighting for democratic rights and integration. The problem was its strategy. How was this fight to be waged? With a strategy that subordinated the struggle to the interests of the ruling class, or one that could push the struggle for black liberation to its conclusion? The fight for democratic rights needed to be fused with the fight to overthrow the entire racist capitalist system. Lacking this perspective, the movement remained partial, achieving mostly token gains and leaving the conditions of the ghettos untouched.

After the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, supposedly marking a watershed moment for black equality, there were ghetto uprisings all across the country in response to the reality of black life. Poverty, unemployment, and rampant police brutality all remained and showed the limitations of the movement’s liberal program. The problems facing the black masses required more than a Civil Rights Act to fix. This reality was especially clear outside the South, where black people had been living without Jim Crow, but still in terrible conditions.

Deep desire for a program that could actually solve the problems of the black community led to the formation of a left wing in the movement that could challenge King. Repulsed by King’s pacifist musings and his conciliation of the ruling class, activists in SNCC started looking for answers outside of the liberal boundaries they were forced to work in. When King and the rest of the liberal establishment condemned the ghetto uprisings and disgustingly called for the strongest police force possible to stop them, it was the last straw for SNCC and other youth.

Disgusted by the dominant liberalism of the civil rights movement, the most militant elements turned to black nationalism because it seemed to offer an alternative. It was the job of Marxists to intersect these elements and show them that a Marxist program was the only strategy for black freedom. Our forebears in the Revolutionary Tendency fought inside the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) to make this perspective a reality. But the SWP abstained from the struggle (expelling

Malcolm X in New York one month before March on Washington. Malcolm saw MLK’s pacifism as obstacle in fight for black liberation, called March the “Farce on Washington.”



Underwood Archives

us in the process) and an opportunity that could have won hundreds of militant black youth to socialism was lost.

Black Power!

Black Power militants wanted to address the needs of the black community without bending to the bourgeoisie. They saw that, despite the passage of numerous civil rights laws, conditions for the black community had not changed. Liberal integration methods had done nothing for them and the “dream” that King had was nothing more than a nightmare. There were several black nationalist groups that sprouted up in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, but the most notable has to be the Black Panther Party for Self Defense.

Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Panthers in Oakland, California in 1966. They were inspired to form the group by the ghetto uprisings that swept the nation, largely in response to police violence. Newton recognized the need to fight against police brutality and came up with the idea of forming armed patrols to monitor the cops. They wanted to mobilize the black community to take matters into their own hands. The Panthers saw themselves as the vanguard of the ghettos

and wanted to mobilize the unemployed black masses to take power. The downtrodden masses desperately needed a solution to their problems; the question is what force can provide it?

Marxists look to the working class because it has the social power and objective self-interest in overthrowing the oppressors. It’s not because of some weird fetish. The working class makes everything run and is exploited by the same masters responsible for black oppression. Workers’ leverage is their labor, and when they withhold it, all of society stops—it scares the crap out of the capitalists. To have this force on your side gives you an effective weapon to do battle against the capitalists. The Panthers were anti-imperialist and connected their fight to that of the Vietcong against U.S. imperialism, which is all good. But without winning over and mobilizing the class that has the power to actually defeat U.S. imperialism, you leave yourself isolated and at a dead end. Which is exactly what played out.

While the Panthers were militant and ready to sacrifice their lives for black liberation, their lack of working-class connection left them open to extreme state



AP

October 1966: SNCC’s Stokely Carmichael popularized call for Black Power, denounced the draft during Vietnam War at UC Berkeley mass rally.



Universal History Archive

Bobby Seale and Huey Newton founded Black Panther Party in Oakland in 1966. Links to the working class could have countered state repression and murder of the black radical vanguard.

repression and murder. As one confidential 1968 memo to J. Edgar Hoover put it, "The negro youth and moderate[s] must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teaching, they will be dead revolutionaries." The FBI was hysterical about a group of armed black militants who wanted to take down the system and they feared the rise of a "black messiah" that could unleash the anger brewing in the ghettos. The state assassinated at least 28 Panthers, including 17-year-old Bobby Hutton, and Fred Hampton, whom they shot as he slept next to his pregnant fiancée.

Mobilizing mass working-class support could have been a protection against the state's murderous plots. It would have at least made it harder for the Panthers to be wiped out so quickly. Imagine if every time a Panther was killed, striking workers shut down cities across the country, or even picked up arms themselves. Sadly, this did not happen and the Panthers experienced a rapid decline under the weight of the government's deadly COINTELPRO.

In addition to state repression other external factors contributed to the Panthers' fall. They had become popular by tapping into the rage of the black community that was fed up with being stepped on. Their anti-imperialism and opposition to the Vietnam War resonated with youth and leftists. After the U.S. began to lose in Vietnam, the war effort was scaled back and antiwar sentiment dissipated. Affirmative action programs began to provide opportunities for some, and black electoral representation began to rise. Many began to ask, "Why look for revolutionary answers

if the war is ending and black people have greater access to things like jobs and universities that had barred them for decades?" This left the Panthers even more isolated as their liberal allies dropped them in order to cozy up to the capitalist system.

When the liberals left, a wing of the Panthers, led by Huey Newton, chased them. They sanitized themselves and dropped all talk of armed defense or overthrowing the system. They stopped the armed patrols and focused all their activities on fundraising and solving problems through the courts. They no longer saw the immediate possibility of armed struggle against the state. What did seem possible was to run for office as a Democrat, which is exactly what Bobby Seale did when he ran for Oakland mayor. To support this, Newton called to close every Panther office outside of Oakland and told everyone to come to Oakland and support the campaign.

On the other side was the Eldridge Cleaver wing, which hated this sanitation and wanted to push armed struggle today. They knew the system was the enemy and it needed to be defeated. They hated the Newton wing's cozying up with liberals. They resorted to guerrilla warfare and adventurist acts. Obviously, this did not lead to insurrection, but left them either dead or in jail. As for Cleaver, he fled the country and found God.

In the end, neither Newton's liberal liquidationist wing nor Cleaver's adventurist wing could advance the fight for black liberation. The struggle for black freedom had to be tied to the fight for the emancipation of the entire working class. Otherwise, the options were appealing to liberals or being gunned down by the state.

What About the Working Class?

During this period, the working class was quite passive on the question of black oppression. While UAW head Walter Reuther gave tepid support to the civil rights movement, he was despised by black workers because he condoned the racist conditions prevalent in the auto plants. He stood alongside King, but his own house was a racist hellhole.

The most militant working-class element in the fight for black liberation was the League

of Revolutionary Black Workers. They originated in the Detroit auto plants in response to the white racist labor bureaucracy and the need to provide a working-class alternative to the Panthers' organizing of the "brothers on the block." They knew they had social power in the auto plants and wanted to wield it in defense of their black brothers and sisters on and off the job. However, they rejected the need to organize with white workers in the factories. This left them vulnerable to the bosses' attacks. You can't shut down a factory in defense of black rights when half the factory stays inside. While the League had a working-class orientation, their rejection of integrated struggle undermined their fight.

3. Liberal Integration Fails

The black radicalism of the '60s died with the defeat of the Panthers. The civil rights movement had established formal equality, and many of its liberal leaders integrated nicely into the Democratic Party. By the mid 1970s, it seemed at least superficially like integration might actually stand a chance. Overt racists, like George Wallace, no longer defiantly denounced desegregation. Jim Crow signs were gone and some black people got middle-class jobs through affirmative action programs. Black mayors and politi-



Detroit Historical Society

1968 slate of Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and 16 demands on UAW leadership. DRUM and others formed the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. They attracted militant whites, but rejected their support. Only integrated struggle will bring black liberation.

cians were popping up all across the country and the ghetto riots had ceased. The illusion that black freedom could come through gradual reforms under capitalism seemed to hold some water.

But liberal integration schemes were destined to fail. There was no integrated class struggle that cut into the power and profits of the oppressors and could expand the available resources for workers and the oppressed. The masters simply squeezed a small part of the black population into a decaying hellscape. During the '70s the U.S. economy was racked by the most severe economic recession in decades (i.e., stagflation). The bills for costly military adventures and the defeat in Vietnam were adding up and, as always, workers would have to pay. Faced with a shrinking pool of resources, liberal integration just meant different groups constantly being at each other's throats in competition for them.

From the beginning, the ruling class stoked these anxieties and wielded the inflamed racial tension to their benefit. In 1968, Nixon's "Southern Strategy" promised "law and order" to white voters angry about desegregation. In 1976, Jimmy Carter campaigned with George "Segregation Forever" Wallace in Alabama to denounce welfare. Republicans and Democrats alike scapegoated black people for the white economic plight, which contributed to the re-emergence and growth of the Klan. In 1979, the Klan (aided by federal agents) murdered five activists in an integrated, communist-led, anti-Klan protest in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Affirmative action allowed black people access to higher education for the first time and had to be defended. But as time passed, this became an institutionalized part of academia or the workplace. It is not a solution that gradually improves the conditions of black people but at best a Band-Aid and at worst it sets up black people for racist backlash.

Busing was set up to fail, too. The idea was that black kids would be bused to white schools and vice versa. Voila! Desegregation! But black children weren't bused to affluent white schools in wealthy areas, but to working-class and poor schools with minimal resources. They were thrust into hostile environments primed by the dog whistle politics of the ruling class. As for white students, a number of them were shipped to crumbling ghetto schools. Obviously, this outraged parents.

Segregation is the material basis of black oppression and has been cemented in the foundation of American capitalist society since the beginning. Separate is never equal and the physical separation of black and white only breeds racial ten-



Stanley Forman/Boston Herald American

Boston, 1976: Racist anti-busing mob attacks black lawyer Ted Landsmark.

sion. It obstructs social cohesion and class unity and makes it easier for the cops to terrorize the ghettos. White workers and the black masses must fight for integration because segregation strengthens their common enemy. But this doesn't mean fighting to share the crumbs from the masters.

Revolutionary integration means linking the black struggle to the working-class struggle against capitalism. The capitalists want black and white workers to think that the only way to get more is by taking from each other. The truth is, the only way to get more for anyone is to take from the capitalists. Fighting for more and better integrated schools, housing, etc. at the masters' expense is the way forward. Anything else will only breed reaction.

4. Reagan Reaction

The "stagflation" crisis of the '70s eased in the early '80s, and the ruling class needed to reorient and improve its economic, military and political position. This began the neoliberal era of privatization and economic liberalization. U.S. imperialism had regrouped from the defensive posture of the '70s and had to go on the offensive. In 1980, Carter launched an anti-Soviet crusade in the name of "human rights," paving the way for an all-out reactionary offensive against the USSR: Cold War II. To shore itself up and to pay for this campaign, the ruling class had to slash social spending—the New Deal order had to be dismantled.

In the 1930s, FDR's New Deal was used to stabilize the U.S. economy after being rocked by the biggest economic crisis in history, the Great Depression. It stood on three core pillars. 1) State regulated capitalism was meant to help calm the unstable market. 2) A class compro-

mise: the capitalists granted heavy concessions to labor at the bosses' expense in order to stop the growing class battles and undermine the influence of communism. 3) The welfare state came into being. The purpose of the New Deal was to calm a tumultuous situation for the ruling class. This direct state intervention was their means to fortify themselves against the backdrop of growing tensions in Europe. This restabilizing was necessary to win the coming world war and set up a stable base for their empire. The ideology that was pushed with it was that the capitalist government supposedly worked to benefit the people and had a duty to take care of its citizens.

But the New Deal order was established when the U.S. was a rising superpower and could afford to make such concessions. In subsequent decades, as the U.S. began to decline, racked by crisis after crisis, it was no longer in the interests of the ruling class to maintain such expenditures. Ronald Reagan promised to tear it up. This meant crushing labor, slashing welfare and tearing up the U.S. industrial base by offshoring jobs to maximize profits for the capitalists. Accompanying this was an ideological shift toward "personal responsibility" and "pull yourself up by your bootstraps."

Reagan was a total reactionary who waged a frontal attack on black people and labor. But he smoked Carter in the election. So what was his appeal? Reagan was able to win a large section of the white working class who were suffering from economic misery, and locked in competition with black people for jobs and resources. They hated affirmative action and busing and saw the token gains that black people had made as an attack on their livelihoods.



Workers Vanguard

U.S. Steel central furnaces in Cleveland abandoned in 1980. Deindustrialization under neoliberal order destroyed millions of jobs.

Black people knew that Reagan was a direct threat to them. The central political characteristics of the 1980s were a conservative reaction to the civil rights movement and the scapegoating of black people for the economic squeeze the ruling class was putting on workers. Gutting industrial jobs spiked unemployment, especially in the black community. Many turned to crime and drugs that the government helped flood into the ghettos. Reagan made it his mission to get the black “underclass” out of society and mass incarceration became a permanent fixture of American society.

As for labor, it was still reeling from the recession when the bosses shuttered factories and destroyed millions of jobs. Having caught wind that the Soviets were in crisis, the bosses felt less need to pacify the workers with the compromises of the New Deal order, and a sharp turn was made against the unions. To compete with Japan and Germany the bosses slashed wages and benefits. When PATCO, the air traffic controllers union, went on strike demanding better wages, conditions and a shorter workweek, Reagan called the strike illegal and fired more than 11,000 workers. The union bureaucrats refused to fight back by shutting down the airports and the PATCO strike was crushed—a blow that the labor movement has not recovered from to this day.

Workers and the black masses needed to unite and fight back against their common class enemy. But the treacherous union misleaders didn’t fight to integrate black people into the unions and left them

trapped in the worst jobs. Black activists fought against this. But they mostly did so by attacking seniority and suing the unions in the capitalist courts that exist to defend the “right” of the bosses to oppress black people and smash the unions.

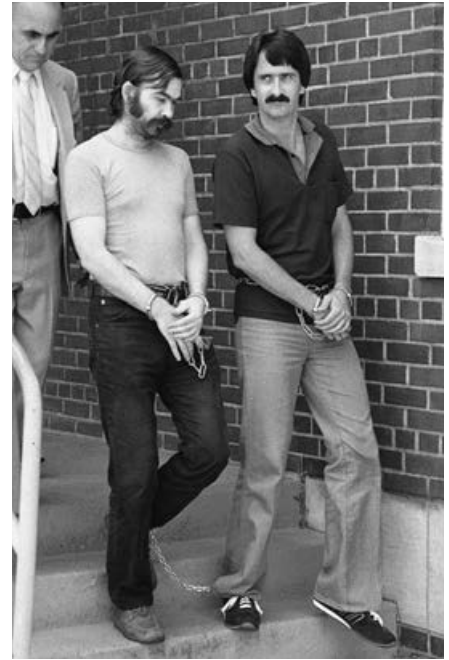
The economic attacks and inflamed racial divisions in this period fueled the growth of the Nazis and the Klan. This scum always festers in the cracks of capitalist society. When fascists attempted to rear their heads, the Spartacist League joined with the vanguard of black and trade-union militants to stop them. The mobilizations showed on a small scale the type of integrated struggle that was necessary. This required a fight against liberal politicians and the union misleaders who opposed militant independent working-class action against the jackbooted thugs. In 1980, when the Nazis tried to publicly celebrate Hitler’s birthday in San Francisco, 1,200 came out to stop them. In 1982, when the Klan announced a march against “illegal” immigrants in D.C., 5,000 union members, black youth and anti-racist militants swept them off the streets. Earlier in ’82, when the Nazis planned a provocation against the Gay Pride Day march in Chicago, an SL-initiated labor/black mobilization thwarted them.

5. From Reaction to “Inclusion”

The ’90s solidified the death of the New Deal order and the triumph of neoliberalism. Counterrevolution in the Soviet Union gave the imperialists a new lease on life and a temporary reprieve from their cycle of crises. Now able to expand into previously untapped territory, globalization allowed the imperialists to spread their tentacles all across the globe.

Communism was said to be dead and liberal triumphalism reigned. To justify its global domination, the U.S. ruling class proclaimed that the liberal capitalist model was the pinnacle of human history. Supposedly, under the guidance of the U.S. empire, it would spread around the world and bring untold progress. This meant that the imperialists would assert their interests under the watchwords of “freedom and democracy” and “defense of the defenseless.” They plundered the world and destabilized whole regions while claiming to help poor people under the guise of “progressive values.”

The strengthening position of U.S. imperialism meant that the free flow of capital and cheap labor across borders corresponded to the ruling class’s interests, and the Immigration Act of 1990 facilitated this by dramatically expanding immigration. The rulers began to talk about “diversity” and “multiculturalism” to peddle their plans, which would have



Hathcox/AP

PATCO air traffic controllers union leaders hauled off in chains during 1981 strike.

devastating consequences for the working class and even further inflame racial divisions. Amid massive deindustrialization, the rulers used the huge influx of cheap immigrant labor to drive down union density, wages and working conditions. In the South, black workers were pitted against newly arrived Hispanics, particularly in meatpacking, reinforcing divisions that stand as obstacles to unionization. Because the labor leadership was unwilling to direct a struggle against the class responsible for the immiseration of domestic and foreign-born workers, workers’ anger could find only a reactionary expression. In the construction trades, for example, it was not uncommon for the carpenters union to call immigration authorities on non-union job sites.

In the ’70s and ’80s, when the Soviet Union stood as a counterweight to imperialism, the U.S. ruling class had less room to maneuver. Talk of “diversity” and “equality” would quickly run up against the reality of racist oppression in this country and risk sparking a radical movement that might sympathize with the communist opponents of the U.S. Economically in that period, the capitalists could not afford the luxury of pacifying layers of the oppressed with some crumbs. They had to crack down and enforce a strong and rigid sense of national identity by stoking white racist reaction. After they triumphantly proclaimed the “death of communism,” they could be more flexible about how they pursued their interest, and what they could allow at home.

Under Clinton, the oppressors' patriotism carried a message of racial reconciliation. They celebrated the diversity of the "melting pot" as the essence of Americanism. Clinton's "multiculturalism" was tailored to advance the neoliberal agenda of a "world without borders" where the export of U.S. finance capital would be unencumbered. In his 2000 State of the Union Address, he saluted California for leading the nation in multiculturalism,

"Within ten years there will be no majority race in our largest state, California. In a little more than 50 years, there will be no majority race in America. In a more interconnected world, this diversity can be our greatest strength. Just look around this chamber. We have members from virtually every racial, ethnic, and religious background. And America is stronger for it."

Clinton gushed that American diversity was a "Godsend" and "a huge gift in a global economy and a global society." This dramatic shift in tone from the U.S. rulers is less surprising when one considers that San Francisco and New York City, two of the most diverse and liberal cities in the country, just happen to be major centers of finance capital and are central to the neoliberal order.

Clinton launched the One America Initiative, which set up talk shops so people could "dialogue" about "racial differences." And he defended affirmative action in speeches. Of course, none of this lofty rhetoric improved material conditions for black people. Its purpose was to unify the nation around the new world order. It also gave birth to modern identity politics, which was compatible with and nourished by the ideology of the liberal world order.



"War on drugs" and mass incarceration meant war on black people.

Bill Clinton playing saxophone on Arsenio Hall Show five months before being elected president. Clinton presided over mass incarceration, ended welfare as we know it and signed the crime bill all while being the "first black president."

Saxon/AP



Clinton certainly made a show of celebrating diversity but he didn't give black people much to celebrate. Instead, he ramped up mass incarceration and slashed welfare. The ruling class wanted to clean up the big cities to make them more attractive as global financial centers, so they swept black people off the streets en masse over the most minor offenses. But compared to the '80s there was much less pushback against skyrocketing arrests because crime was down, employment was up, and Clinton didn't come off like Reagan, the repulsive racist.

Despite being targeted by Clinton's policies, lots of black people supported him. Some neighborhoods were getting slightly better and there was job growth—even though a majority were not high-paying union jobs but low-paid gig work. The new liberal lip service of the ruling class even allowed Clinton to pass off his "superpredators" crime bill and the "end of welfare" as helping the black community not disparaging it.

The imperialists' new liberal veneer was quite effective at neutralizing and pacifying their victims and opponents. It allowed them to claim global moral authority while locking up black people and pillaging the world. Regarding the fight for black liberation, liberalism replaced struggle with symbolism, power with "representation," and freedom with "inclusion."

Liberalized Labor

For the most part, labor fell in line in the '90s. When John Sweeney took the helm of the AFL-CIO in '95, after having promised to bring more "diversity" to the labor movement, some black labor leaders thought he might be the one to make the unions respond to black needs. However, this only marked labor's adaptation to the liberalism pushed by Clinton. Some more black people were included into union leadership under Sweeney, but union density continued to drop.

The NAFTA and WTO trade deals caused a big stir during the '90s. Clinton pitched his trade policy as a "force for social progress." NAFTA would supposedly "promote more growth, more equality, better preservation of the environment, and a greater possibility of world peace." But of course, the gloomy prophecies about a "giant sucking sound" taking jobs out of the country were more accurate.

At the end of the day, while labor leaders made some noise against the deals, they did not actually wage a struggle against the bosses to save jobs. The previous AFL-CIO president and veteran Cold Warrior, Lane Kirkland, opposed the deals on a chauvinist basis. But Sweeney's objections to the WTO took a different angle. While he worked closely with Clinton and actually endorsed the WTO, he found himself at the large Seattle anti-globalization demonstration denouncing China's admission on an anti-communist basis. His complaint was essentially that Clinton's commitment to neoliberal "human rights" imperialism wasn't sufficient.

The left tended to denounce objections to offshoring as protectionist and nativist, echoing the liberal condemnations of workers' genuine concerns for their jobs. There needed to be an anti-imperialist fight against the bosses who were hell-bent on hollowing out industry in pursuit of profits. Many black workers' lives would be ruined. But the forces that could stand against the bosses were disoriented by the new liberal world order.

Farrakhan Despair

The biggest black movement in the '90s was the Nation of Islam's (NOI) Million Man March. NOI leader Louis Farrakhan repelled many mainstream liberals with his religious conservatism. But he attracted many black people who were desperate to do something for the black community.

In the late '90s, some upper layers of the black community saw an increase in

jobs, but the situation in the ghettos was still desperate. In 1992, L.A. exploded after the acquittal of the cops who beat Rodney King. The rage was not just about the sadistic police violence that plagued the ghettos, but also the miserable conditions and few job prospects from deindustrialization. The righteous anger of the black masses was justified. But the upheaval showed that there was a vacuum of leadership to direct it effectively against the oppressors.

Farrakhan filled that vacuum. His preaching of black pride was electric to people who had nothing. But the slogans of his march were about black men “taking responsibility” and “atonement.” A far cry from the optimistic radicalism of the ’60s—the mood had dramatically shifted to hopelessness and despair. You still see ideas like this in the black community all the time: “Racism will never end,” or “Others can do it, but we can’t. Must be something wrong with us” or “It’s on us to work harder and be better to build the black community.”

Farrakhan’s ideas are still articulated today, even outside the NOI. They are and were compatible with Clinton’s downplaying racial oppression as a systemic issue and his preaching of personal responsibility as the main obstacle. They reflect a false consciousness that now that there is formal equality, all you had to do was “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” and everything should work out for you.

6. Post Racial Society?

For almost two decades, the liberal world order seemed almost indestructible. But the shot of adrenaline that U.S. imperialism got from globalization did not cure its disease. In fact, the very system that put them on top was now undermining their position. For a while, the rulers enriched themselves by propelling world trade with extraordinary foreign investment. They raked in obscene cash but in the process built up the economies of their enemies, allies and victims abroad. They dismantled domestic manufacturing, decimating good jobs, and let infrastructure rot.

In 2008, the financial crisis rocked the world hard and workers and black people got screwed. Tons of people lost jobs and homes. The rulers bailed out the banks and left regular people to try and survive on low-paid gig work. They started printing money like nothing mattered, setting the conditions for an even bigger collapse later.

Then, the impossible: Barack Obama, enter stage left. In racist America, a black man in the White House was just a joke or a dream to many. Just the sight was



Reuters

16 October 1995: Louis Farrakhan, leader of NOI at Million Man March. His message of black pride countered despair, but “atonement” does not challenge capitalist system.

enough to spark hope that small change might bring a post-racial society. He was liberalism in the flesh and many believed that perhaps this presidency was different. Perhaps Clinton’s vision of diversity was finally being realized. Smoke and mirrors.

As it turns out, the election was not the end of racism or oppression, but a cheap trick by the ruling class. In the face of economic crisis, the imperialists had to do something. Leaning into liberalism had worked so well for years. So they took a giant leap down that same road. U.S. imperialism desperately needed a facelift after Bush’s war in Iraq had deeply damaged America’s moral reputation. A black man overseeing the carnage was the perfect ploy to lull the masses.

But as Obama played out his term—eulogizing a Klansman, launching drone strikes and war, overseeing rising poverty and an assault on education—his reign proved more of the same. He deported millions of immigrants. He propped up banks and auto bosses on the workers’ dime. He carried out anti-worker attacks for the racist ruling class, aided dutifully by the liberal labor misleadership, of course. All the while, excuses were made and passes were given in no small part because liberal identity politics demanded that criticism of a black president be more muted.

Meanwhile, MAGA was brewing. A liberal, black enforcer of capitalist austerity grinding workers to dust was sure to breed white reaction. And discontent was not limited to the laboring masses. Inside the masters’ ruling parties, differences emerged over which way forward for their empire. Straight ahead down the old liberal road, despite the crumbling surface beneath them? Or take down the order they’d erected?

7. Here Comes Trump

This is what set the stage for the election of Donald Trump (the first time). Many white workers, fed up with their worsen-



Brooks/TWP

ing economic situation, went for Trump in 2016. Plenty of others, especially black people, stood by the Democrats out of fear of reaction. Trump’s election sent the liberals into hysterics. His brazenness was incompatible with liberal sensibilities and, even worse, he threatened the very world order that had done them so well for the last 30 years. They quickly got together the #resistance and amped up the moral righteousness to 1000. Armed with pussy hats and a dream, they quickly defined the battle lines as either you’re with the Dems or you’re a Trump-loving fascist. They painted “Trump’s base” as solely deplorable white supremacists and spit on anyone who was concerned about his worsening economic conditions.

However, some fascists were emboldened after the election of Trump, e.g., the fascists in Charlottesville. And Trump’s rhetoric invoked fear because he was going to attack minorities. The left needed to fight for better conditions and link that struggle to the necessity of defending minorities. In order to succeed it needed a class-independent character. This required the left to participate in the various “resistance” movements to expose the bankruptcy of liberalism and point the way forward for workers and the oppressed. They had to make clear that any real improvements could be won only through confrontation with the interests of the ruling class, including its liberal wing.

The left needed to break the liberal grip on the anti-Trump resistance and split it along class lines. But this didn’t happen. The left echoed the liberal hysteria and joined the crusade against “Trump’s base.” White workers who voted for Trump were branded irredeemable racists, their real and worsening conditions dismissed. This was political poison. It deepened racial divisions. White workers

moved toward reaction. Black workers went to the Democratic Party, convinced that winning white workers to black liberation was impossible.

8. The George Floyd Protests

The largest movement for black rights since the civil rights movement was BLM. While BLM started in 2013 after the murder of Trayvon Martin, it blew up in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. It was an eruption against the rampant police brutality that plagues black life in this country. Protesters in the millions took to the streets demanding justice and “defund the police.” BLM was a defining moment that gained international attention and politicized a generation of youth. So why is it that in 2026 police brutality still runs rampant and BLM is nowhere to be found? There are many different explanations that come up. The main one is that the leaders of BLM, Inc. were sellouts who screwed the movement over by stealing money and going off to buy fancy new houses. While this may have happened, this doesn’t explain why a movement that was so huge wasn’t able to win any of its demands.

The real problem here, as this whole article has tried to stress, is *political*. In order to stop police brutality or to effectively advance the fight for black equality you must aim to go up against the interests of the capitalist class. But BLM was a liberal movement for cop reform that proved to be compatible with the liberals’ resistance. Those who supported BLM ranged from black activists to politicians to unions to Jeff Bezos. An alliance with capitalist forces necessarily means that aspirations of the oppressed masses will have to be subordinated to the interests of the ruling class. Marches, speeches and symbolic action (blacking out your Instagram profile pics) might be acceptable to

one’s ruling-class “allies,” but anything that can actually cause any harm to the existing system will of course repel them.

The movement was politically dominated by calls for cop reform, but concretely what does this mean? It means calling for more black people in impotent civilian review boards, trying to tweak city budgets, trying to get ineffective body-cam and choke-hold laws passed in Congress and trying to elect a new police commissioner (probably a black one). All this does is get black people involved in managing the very system that is repressing them. History shows these measures are completely ineffective at stopping police terror. But they lend an air of legitimacy to the violent machinery of black oppression, which only pacifies the masses with the illusion of control (see “How to Get *Real* Community Control,” page 56).

The main slogan of BLM became “defund the police.” The idea usually meant that city budgets should reallocate funds from the cops to pay for things like housing and social services, which would eliminate the root causes of crime. It’s true that the misery of life under capitalism breeds crime. But the capitalists’ budgetary priorities are not a mere accident or moral failing. As we’ve established, black oppression—which cop terror is a key part of—serves the fundamental interests of the ruling class. The rulers have no interest in the massive investment it will take to fix the ghetto. Nor do they have any interest in weakening the armed thugs they use to break strikes, disperse protests and otherwise violently enforce their rule.

Despite these facts, enormous effort was put into pressuring Democrats to “defund.” How did that turn out? Bigwigs like Biden simply opposed the call, while trying to spin opposition with a bit of sympathy. By the time of his 2022 State of

the Union Address, he called to “fund the police.” Bernie Sanders openly opposed the call too, and insisted that cops be “well-paid.” The “Squad” (AOC, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, etc.) were some of the few who embraced the slogan. But all this really amounted to was support to the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which proposed granting federal aid to police departments conditional on meeting standards of “decency and honorableness,” as Biden put it. The bill died in 2021.

Karen Bass, then Congressional Black Caucus chair and author of the “George Floyd Act,” condemned the “defund” slogan as “one of the worst slogans ever,” while allowing that she thought police budgets could be reduced. After becoming mayor of L.A., she proceeded to increase the LAPD budget. BLM-LA continues to court her on the issue and when they asked her in 2025 how “the people” could get her to scale back the cops’ budget, she answered frankly, saying, “It’s not going to happen.”

Thirteen days after Floyd was murdered, the Minneapolis City Council voted to dismantle the police. Nothing of the sort happened, and within a few months the plan was dropped, with Council members explaining that they were confused and didn’t really mean it. Other cities like New York, L.A., Baltimore, Austin and others voted to reduce police budgets. Overwhelmingly, the cuts were made by shifting some costs, like forensics and support, to other parts of the city budget with no discernible impact on the number of pigs in the street. In almost all cases, whatever pitiful budget tinkering was done got quickly reversed. NYC’s “socialist” mayor Mamdani quickly reversed his position too. He went from calling to defund the police to licking Zionist police commissioner Tisch’s boots the second he got into office.



Honda/AFP



Sally Ryan/ZUMA

Obama and Biden celebrate 2008 election victory (left). Milwaukee, 2010: Evicted woman with belongings. Liberal imperialist order was hell for workers and black people (right).



Brooks/Anadolu



Keith Birmingham/MediaNews Group

Left: Protesters in front of burning police precinct, Minneapolis, 28 May 2020. Right: Los Angeles protest at City Hall, 6 June 2020. May 2020 cop killing of George Floyd sparked massive protest wave across country. Marxists needed to fight to split militants from openly pro-capitalist wing of the movement.

But what could have been done? BLM didn't just have craven, pro-Democratic Party politicians in its ranks. It had a number of young activists who were anarchists, socialists, or some type of leftists who hated capitalism, the cops and the Democrats. They burned down a police station, which was pretty militant. What was necessary for the movement to succeed was a political split with the openly pro-capitalist wing of the movement. This would have opened the road to winning radicals to a revolutionary program that could actually advance the struggle against police brutality.

What was necessary was more than telling people that reforming the state was impossible. One had to fight to change the movement's course by showing how the liberal politics that dominated it were an obstacle to black liberation. But this didn't happen. Pretty much all of the Marxist left participated in BLM, but most cheered on the movement while offering some leftist critiques, building a left flank of BLM instead of trying to split it on class lines.

Leftists often cite the 2020 ILWU Local 10 Juneteenth shutdown as a model for mobilizing labor in defense of black people. But this demonstration was completely in line with the liberal politics that chained BLM. While the speakers tried to put on an independent face for leftist consumption, the reality is that the ILWU International had endorsed Biden the month prior. This was no independent class mobilization, but a moral commemoration featuring Democrats, their celebrity boosters and the bosses. Leftists who hail this hide the fact that unchaining labor's power in defense of black people will require a fight against labor's misleaders, who shackle workers to the Democrats.

At the demonstration, ILWU president Willie Adams called on "good cops" to

"start checking those bad cops." But a cop is a cop, and their role in society is to enforce the racist rule of the capitalists. The only force with the power to fight the rulers is the working class organized in its own independent class interest. It's good that many workers wanted to do something. But to advance the fight for black liberation, labor action must be directed against the ruling class and seek to break illusions in all its parties.

9. The Biden Blip

BLM's liberal program meant that "success" could only be expressed in ways compatible with the capitalist system of oppression. As such, its energy was channeled into the Democratic Party. Its highest "achievement" was helping propel Biden into office. Biden didn't even have to embrace the demand "defund the police." Despite having eulogized staunch segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond, Biden seemed pretty tame compared to Trump's racist rants.

Four erratic years under Trump and the catastrophe of the Covid pandemic made Biden a welcome return to "normalcy" for many, including elements of the ruling class. The pandemic had accelerated the further breakdown of the liberal world order and exposed its utter inability to meet the basic needs of working people. Biden selected a black woman as his VP, did his senile impression of a statesman and the heat was turned down.

But Biden's presidency could not reverse the trends at work, or translate into real change for black people. He fueled inflation by printing money to recover from Covid and fund the unpopular imperialist adventures from Ukraine to Gaza. The end of draconian Covid restrictions lowered black unemployment some, but cops continued killing black people unabated.

The administration pretended to care about black people and launched DEI programs, but they did little more than fuel racial divisions (see page 3). Little progress had been made, but with the overt racist out of office, the black struggle was sapped of energy.

At the same time, as the pandemic faded many workers felt it was time to cash in on what they thought was owed to them. They had given the bosses major concessions and risked their lives to keep capitalism running through the crisis. In 2022, Biden and Congress spiked a rail strike before it began. Then in 2023 a wave of labor unrest culminated in the "hot labor summer." UPS Teamsters and then the ILWU threatened strike action, but both leaderships took a bribe from the White House before workers even went out. Then, in September the UAW head Shawn Fain called a strike in auto.

All three of these workforces wield enormous social power and are heavily black. A hard fight by any of them had the potential to turn things around in the country. But to do that their leadership had to be willing to cause a real crisis for the bosses and the Biden administration. The auto bosses were struggling to compete internationally and the fragility of the supply chain was on full display during Covid. The bosses were not going to concede easily and economic struggle alone could not galvanize the force necessary to land a real blow and win significant improvements.

The UAW strike was centered in Detroit, the most segregated city in America. Deindustrialization had made life a living hell in the Midwest, especially for black workers. Having no further use for workers in the region, the bosses had poisoned Flint's water and destroyed black Detroit. Linking the auto workers' struggle to

the fight for black liberation could have drawn workers and the oppressed across the region into the battle. A general strike in Detroit to abolish tiers, reindustrialize the country and fight for black liberation was a real possibility.

But this is not the perspective of liberal labor leaders like Shawn Fain. While capable of militant rhetoric, Fain only sought to rebalance the scales between capital and labor and was unwilling to take measures that might jeopardize his connections to the Democratic Party. His “Stand Up” strategy minimized impact on the bosses, he refused to stop scabs, and he avoided racial topics during the strike for fear of being divisive. But racial segregation is at the heart of auto workers’ problems. It defines the miserable conditions in Detroit and it is the main obstacle preventing organizing in the “open shop” South.

In the end, despite having the upper hand going into the 46-day strike, the settlement secured some temporary relief for workers but fell far short of their demands. There was an opportunity to not only win what auto workers needed, but to cohere a fighting alliance between all the workers and oppressed in the region. This would have been a beacon for all labor and had the potential to change the course this country is on.

At the time, and to this day, many leftists revere Fain for his militancy. But the fact of the matter is that he sacrificed the initiative because of his liberal, pro-capitalist program. This is just one example of the syphilitic chain that destroys both the workers movement and black struggle. Militant-talking labor misleaders subordinate the workers to the bosses’ parties, and the left refuses to fight against them. The duty of revolutionaries is to expose these bootlickers and replace them with a leadership that will put the fight for black liberation at the center of all labor’s battles.

But no such struggle was waged and the upper hand that labor had was lost. The capitalists were able to regroup and go on the offensive.

10. Trump: The Return

Trump defeated Kamala Harris (after the Dems forcibly retired Biden to even have a shot). Trump’s return to the White House marked the end of the neoliberal world order. His first election was seen as a fluke and the liberals went at him hard, but Biden’s four years proved to be a catastrophe for working people and accelerated the bleeding out of U.S. hegemony.

The more the Democrats doubled down on liberalism as it was reaching its material and ideological limits, the stronger

the forces hostile to it became. The ruling class is now consolidating around a radical shift in strategy to advance its interests. The conditions that made liberalism its dominant ideology are gone and not coming back any time soon. The liberal mask has slipped off and Trump does what he wants when he wants—no moral justification needed.

Liberals have fed right-wing reaction by, among other things, driving a wedge between the working class and oppressed groups. They preach tolerance while pitting different sectors of the oppressed against one another in a scramble over an ever-shrinking pool of resources. This only breeds resentment and division, and has caused the working class to shift to the right.

So, What Now?

Decades of liberal betrayals have led to this. Trump is back, revitalized and on a rampage even worse than before. Everything is dystopian and for now the black struggle has been defeated. The liberal “allies” of black struggle have turned their backs. The liberal world order of yesterday is being dismantled. Many workers have come to see the struggles of the oppressed as against their interests. And the left has become irrelevant to the working class, who see them as either liberal, crazy, or both. The same is true for the black masses, who also see the left as irrelevant, and uncomfortably white. Today, many black militants believe that the left’s focus on class comes at the expense of race, and that communism has nothing to offer black people.

The new period that we are in screams out for a new strategy. Black militants must understand that the historic problem with the black struggle has been the *question of leadership*. For decades the movement’s liberal leadership has only derailed, disoriented, and destroyed the black struggle—chaining them to the ruling class, which will never get rid of black oppression without a fight. Today, token gains that were won are being swept away. And every liberal politician and labor leader that claimed to give a damn about black people now has every excuse in the book when told to turn their nice words into action.

To go forward there must be a decisive break with liberal politics. Communist politics must be embraced. Black militants must consciously form an alliance with the working class, and fight to overcome the divide that exists. This is the only way to mobilize the force that has the power to end black oppression. And it is the way to defend both workers and the black community from the reactionary onslaught today. This does not mean trying to revive “wokeness,” but building a fighting alliance of workers and the oppressed. This does not mean to give any concessions to backward consciousness, but to show in practice how the fight against black oppression is urgently necessary to strengthen the workers movement. History has shown that both the workers and black struggle have been catastrophically weakened without this perspective. Labor and black rights either go forward together or fall back separately. We cannot afford for this to continue. **For Black and Red Power!** ■



Workers Vanguard

Detroit, 15 September 2023: Contingent from Louisville Ford plant at UAW strike rally. Spartacists fought for black liberation to be at center of battle.

Fighting for Black

If you want to fight for black liberation, it is necessary to strengthen and expand the labor unions in order to have the necessary force required to fight back against this racist capitalist system. The very concept of a union means collective action: the workers are stronger together against the boss than they can ever be separately. Union militants must strive to combat all divisions that keep the workers movement on its knees, especially right now when Trump has made it clear that he will restore U.S. dominance on the backs of the workers and the oppressed.

The capitalists' main weapon to weaken their wage slaves is racial oppression, caused by the forcible segregation of black people, which divides workers and cripples collective struggle. Another weapon is the division of workers with seniority against the new hires, who suffer lower wages and benefits. This inequality is commonly referred to as the "tiers" system, where black people are often

allocated to the bottom rungs, reflecting their position in society.

These obstacles to working-class unity are just as important today as they were when we first published, in 2024, the articles below about the East and Gulf Coast International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and the West Coast International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). These two unions offer some of the best jobs open to black people, and both unions have a significant black membership.

In the ILA, the carving up of locals by race and craft cripples the union's power to stand up against the bosses and against government attacks. The need to fuse the separate locals at each port was sharply posed at the time of the ILA's October 2024 strike. This class battle could have been a game changer for all labor, galvanizing port and other workers to join in and win a decisive victory. But instead of organizing the strike to maximize the unity and strength of longshore workers and their working-class allies, the union tops did

Segregation Holds Back ILA Prepare to Strike! Fuse the Locals!

Reprinted from Workers Vanguard No. 1182, September 2024.

International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) president Harold Daggett instructed East and Gulf Coast longshore workers to prepare to strike over wages and automation on October 1. The ILA Master Contract will expire just five weeks before the presidential election. Democratic and Republican politicians are increasingly inciting racial conflict between white

workers and black workers. Liberals push the lie that anyone who doesn't vote for Biden's partner-in-crime, Kamala Harris, must be an anti-woman racist. Meanwhile, Trump and J.D. Vance seize on workers' justified anger at the Establishment and try to create a lynch mob atmosphere against immigrants, blacks, and trans people.

These same racial divisions threaten to undermine any strike. For example, in Newark, New Jersey, and Norfolk, Vir-

ginia, there are two longshore locals, one predominantly black and the other predominantly white. But with the right strategy, the ILA can unite its ranks and win a real victory against the shipping bosses and America's rulers. This would show the way forward for workers across the country. To do that and win decisive gains, the union must link the struggle for more jobs and better wages and working conditions to the fight against racial oppression. Either the union moves to break down its divisions or the bosses and their liberal politicians will use them to break a strike. End the segregated union setup that undermines the ILA's fighting power!

At the 2023 ILA convention, ILA vice president Dennis Daggett said about the contract negotiations, "If it's a fight they want, it's a war they're gonna get!" That sounds good. But preparation for class war must not be left in the hands of the Daggetts and other ILA tops. Even though it is possible for them to lead a strike, they enforce the segregated status quo that could easily sink it. Longshore workers would be held back by the ILA tops' entire strategy—to seek favors from Trump and the Democrats, declare themselves partners of the USMX company alliance and focus on boosting the bosses' profits in the name of saving jobs.

How to Stop the Bosses' Divide-and-Conquer Tricks

The first step is to break down the divisions by race and by craft on the docks. Up and down the East Coast, black ILA members are concentrated primarily in

continued on page 30

To strengthen and unite the ILA in preparation for a winning strike battle, we put forward the following program:

- **Top rate and benefits for all ILA members. Eliminate the inequality. For a vastly shorter workday for all—at no loss in daily pay.**
- **Picket lines mean don't cross! Prepare to fight any retaliation against ILA leaders and members. Cops, courts and government: Hands off the union!**
- **Organize interlocal meetings that undercut the race, craft and sectional divisions. Build interracial class-struggle strike committees. Fuse the locals at every port!**

Liberation in the Unions

the very opposite, partnering with the Biden administration behind the scenes to end the strike early. Later, in collaboration with Trump, they cooked up a contract that keeps the divisions among longshore workers intact.

Our article offers a blueprint for forging a new class-struggle leadership in the ILA committed to merging the segregated locals. Forging this new leadership requires a strategy that fights for jobs for all at no loss in weekly pay, and that ensures black workers will not be second-class citizens in an integrated local. The latter is a real concern for black longshoremen who have witnessed rampant discrimination in nominally “integrated” unions and one racist “anti-DEI” purge after another in the government sector (see page 3).

Meanwhile on the West Coast, ILWU bottom-tier workers receive inferior wages, no health benefits and are not even allowed to be full voting members of the ILWU until years after they start working on

the docks! The militant reputation of this union as one which fights for black rights is belied by its leadership’s enforcement of the tier system, which, as this article explains, overlaps and reinforces the racial divisions which the capitalist class uses to sap the power of the entire class.

The Committee to End Tier Segregation was founded in 2024 in the majority-black ILWU Local 10 to fight for full wages, benefits and union membership for all longshoremen. Many ILWUers look at the entrenched tiers system—enforced by the ILWU leadership going back to Harry Bridges, who agreed to the first tier in the 1959 contract—as impossible to dislodge. It will indeed take a major coast-wide fight and confrontation with the shipping bosses to abolish the tiers, which save them millions every year. But the road to forging a new union leadership committed to unleashing the considerable social power of the ILWU lies through the fight to abolish the tiers. ■

End Tier Segregation in

the ILWU!

The following was originally printed as a Workers Vanguard supplement dated 10 February 2024.

The ILWU leadership likes to boast that the union’s wages and benefits are among the highest a worker in this country can get. They are. Getting them is the problem. Many years must be spent as a casual, scrambling to get any work at all, at lower wages and with no health benefits. And then more years as a B-man, mainly working lower-paid, backbreaking tractor jobs. Casuals and B’s are not even allowed to be union members. Those who survive get their A-book; but even as A-men, longshore workers pay a heavy price. Many destroy their bodies working skilled heavy equipment or double and triple shifts to make up for the years they were on the bottom rungs. To regularly work the most highly paid crane and mechanic jobs takes another negative trade-off: being directly hired by the terminal owners as a steady man. This takes jobs away from the union hiring hall and leaves the steadies dependent on the good will of the bosses.

These divisions in the workforce pit different tiers against each other in a struggle to survive, eating away at the very fabric of the union and its capacity to fight for the interests of the workforce as a whole. Safety, in what is a deadly dangerous industry, goes by the boards as everyone works harder and faster to get—or stay—ahead. The ILWU leadership, which works with the PMA to enforce the tier system, says that the lower tiers are a necessary “apprenticeship.” But what kind of apprenticeship program provides little work and minimal company-paid

training? Even many A-men don’t have access to the highest-paid mechanic jobs, which mainly go to those who got their training outside the industry.

Why should A-men literally work themselves to death, with many not even living long enough to collect their pensions, while the casuals struggle to get one or two shifts a month? Many casuals are the children or other relatives of A-men. Everyone wants their kids to get ahead, not to have to work multiple jobs to try to survive. ILWU Local 10 now has 1,000 casuals, almost as many as the number of A-men. Either the union fights to end the tier system by bringing up the

casuals, B’s and A’s alike or the PMA will try to use the casuals, desperate for work, as a battering ram against the union.

The Local 10 leadership in the Bay Area claims that B status is necessary to “educate” these workers in the principles of the union. But what kind of union denies coworkers membership rights for years? The fight to abolish the tiers would be a powerful teacher of *genuine* union principles.

The ILWU leadership argues that the tier divisions are the only way to ensure that there’s enough work for the A’s. But that’s only if you accept the PMA’s “right” to call the shots on the hours of work and the number of jobs that are available. There is another way. A union fight to spread the work among all those

continued on page 31

Committee to End Tier Segregation in the ILWU

Our Mission:

- To strengthen the ILWU and protect our health and safety, we fight for full medical benefits and equal pay for equal work for all longshoremen.
- To end the divisions that pull the union apart, we need to bring the B’s and Casuals into full union membership and registration.
- To create more jobs and strengthen union control of hiring, we fight for shorter work shifts, abolishing the steady man category, and big hourly pay increases so that no one takes a pay cut.
- To make sure everyone has access to skilled work, we call for an expansion of PMA-paid, union-controlled training—including for mechanics—with access to training and skill boards by seniority.



Instagram: @endtiersegregationilwu • Facebook: Committee to End Tier Segregation in the ILWU

ILA...

(continued from page 28)

the longshore craft, while skilled positions such as checkers (clerks) have historically been reserved for white workers. In New Jersey, black longshoremen, white longshoremen, checkers, mechanics and lashers all work together, but they meet in isolated locals on different nights. They fight in isolation the day-to-day company abuse and unsafe work conditions. In most cases, no ILA member of any race in the New York-New Jersey port is allowed to carry their seniority into a physically easier craft (e.g., checker) or a different company's pier; their seniority depends on the company list for each job.

At the moment, the checker jobs in New Jersey and Alabama are under the most direct threat of automation. This mainly white workforce needs unity with black coworkers now more than ever. The black and white longshoremen's own self-defense against future job loss requires defending the checkers today.

Racial segregation is the bosses' main weapon to keep their wage slaves divided and to defend their profit system. Separate is not equal in the unions or in society! Separate schools, housing and medical care means inferior schools, housing and medical care for black people. Liberal politicians say racial equality can only come by taking something away from white workers. This lie pushes white workers—the natural allies of black people—deeper into the arms of anti-union racists like Donald Trump and Marjorie Taylor Greene.

White workers do not benefit from segregation. Discrimination against black people drives everyone's conditions down. White workers are compelled to accept less than what they deserve because the bosses point to the black workers on the bottom and tell white workers: "Quit complaining!"

Maintaining separate locals damages both white and black ILA members' ability to fight—and makes the union an easy target of liberal union-busters like Newark mayor Ras Baraka. The different locals can't win a strike in isolation, so they shouldn't organize themselves in isolation! The union must fight **for one integrated ILA local in every port, with black and white class-struggle leaders.**

Between now and October 1, we urge ILA members to ensure their strike committees are composed of workers from all crafts and locals at their port. Mobilize workers **on the docks and at the terminals** against unsafe work conditions and abuse by the bosses. Insist that your



Workers Vanguard

1 October 2024: ILA picket line, Baltimore. Union leadership undermined strike, sent workers back without a contract and with major issues left unresolved.

union reps meet with you *all together* across local lines.

How to Win Raises and Job Security

Longshoremen know that the shippers have been robbing them blind as they rake in tens of billions in profits annually. The base pay for new hires—\$20/hour—is just slightly over the \$17/hour that ILA members earned in 1986! The current top hourly rate for West Coast ILWU longshoremen is significantly higher than for ILA members.

The vast inequality for ILA new hires undermines senior ILA members' fight for raises, job security and shorter workdays. Why give old-timers a raise to match inflation, if the boss can hire young workers at half price? The ILA should demand **the top rate and benefits for all ILA members—young and old, North and South. For 6 hours' work for 12 hours' pay at ILWU rates! Jobs for all!**

The shipping bosses, most notably Maersk, have been introducing labor-saving technology in violation of the contract. Daggett's strategy has always been to try to stop automation by making longshoremen work faster. This is a losing proposition. It is cutting your own throat, sacrificing safety and allowing the boss to employ fewer workers.

Automation always happens in industry, the question is: Will technology work for longshoremen by **reducing the length of the workweek with no loss in pay**—or will it screw them out of a job? Workers, not the bosses, must control the process of automation to make it benefit them.

The union must have the right to strike over safety and automation decisions at any time. **Eliminate the no-strike clause!**

How to Defeat Government Strikebreaking

In the event of a strike, the shipping bosses will come prepared with their government, their police and their Taft-Hartley strikebreaking law. The government will demand the union call off its strike before the ILA wins a contract. The bosses' press will scream that the strike endangers "national interests," meaning the interests of the bosses.

The Democratic and Republican parties both serve the bosses. When a strike has the potential to change the relations between the classes in favor of labor, they attack the unions. For example, Ronald Reagan fired over 12,000 striking PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981, and Biden outlawed the railroad workers strike in 2022.

To defeat union-busting, it is necessary to know who your friends are and who your enemies are. While the courts, cops and capitalist politicians are on the side of USMX, the ILA's allies are other workers and the oppressed. The ILA must line up support **now** in preparing for a strike. Solidarity does not mean sending a few thousand bucks and a letter saying "best wishes." It means real industrial action.

Workers in many industries are confronted with racial inequality, stagnant wages, unequal pay for the same work and job insecurity. A strike organized and directed against these problems in a way that cuts through divisions and lifts up all workers would enable the ILA to

ILWU...

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who want it at no loss in pay would ensure all longshore workers would be better off. Today's casuals would get jobs at full union wages and benefits. Those who are now A's and B's would be saved wear and tear on their bodies and have more time for themselves and their families.

The PMA bosses, and *they alone*, should have to shoulder the cost of eliminating tier divisions. They rake in billions of dollars just from denying casuals healthcare benefits. For the union to get its hands on that money will take a head-on confrontation with the shipping bosses, disrupting the supply chain crucial to the U.S. economy. But that's not going to happen under a union leadership whose whole strategy is based on tying the fate of the workers to the fortunes of America's rulers. When its contract was up last year, the ILWU was in a strong position to fight for workers' needs and open a broader labor counteroffensive against the bosses. Instead, the ILWU leadership pledged in advance not to strike and then surrendered to the PMA's contract bribe, lending a hand to the ailing Biden administration at the expense of the workers. Today, as the Democrats increasingly fan fears of the openly racist Trump returning to the White House, the union tops' commitment is firmer than ever to heading off any struggle that might cause trouble for Biden and the capitalist rulers as a whole.

Dividing the workers and pitting them against each other is how both the Democratic and Republican wings of the ruling class maintain their profits and power. Their most prized "divide and rule" weapon is the segregation of black people at the bottom of society. This treatment of black people as second-class citizens is mirrored in the tier divisions in the ILWU. At most West Coast ports, there are more black workers on the bottom rungs than

at the top. Some ILWU locals make B's and casuals enter through the back door of the union hall. At union local meetings, B's and casuals who attend have to sit in segregated areas and are denied a vote. Even in Local 10, whose membership is majority black, the higher up the skill level you go the whiter it gets, while manning scales and working conditions are worse than at other West Coast ports. The tier divisions themselves stand in the way of the union mobilizing in collective action to break down racial disparities and establish equal—and better—conditions up and down the coast.

The ILWU leadership's line that bringing up the lower tiers will cost the A-men echoes the bosses who instill white workers with the fear that good jobs, wages and benefits for black people will only come at the expense of white workers. This club is used to pound down conditions for all workers, while keeping black people segregated at the bottom. Just as white workers will advance their interests only if they take up the fight for black equality, black workers will make steps toward their freedom only if they unite with white work-

ers against this country's rulers. ILWU members need to understand that either they fight together to abolish tier segregation or the PMA will continue to use these divisions to cut through the union. The bosses have imposed tier divisions in one industry after another. By putting black liberation at the center of the fight against tiers the ILWU and other unions can draw in the black community and broader layers of the multiracial working class, creating a powerful force to make real inroads against segregation and improve the situation for all workers.

In opposition to the union bureaucracy's losing strategy, longshore workers who want a fighting ILWU need to begin now to convince and mobilize others to abolish the tier system. This is crucial to build working-class unity and prepare the union for the battles ahead—whether in its own defense or the defense of black people or the besieged Palestinians facing U.S.-sponsored genocide. To move forward, the fight against tiers needs to be organized as a challenge to the "right" of the bosses to run the ports and society at large. *End tier segregation in the ILWU!* ■

Wilmington, California, September 2017: Casuals protest outside ILWU hall. Leadership enforces tier system, which pits sections of workforce against each other, undermines union.

Thomas R. Cordova/Daily Breeze



galvanize not only other trade unions but also impoverished black, white and immigrant communities. This would create a powerful force to counter government strikebreaking and propel forward the fight to improve the situation of the entire working class.

The ILA should appeal to the ILWU to not handle diverted cargo in the event of a strike. Similarly, it should approach the Teamsters, rail unions and non-union port truckers, warehouse workers and seamen. The ILA has a special responsibility to assist the port truckers in organizing a union. All of labor must be prepared to

mobilize its forces if the government tries to break an ILA strike.

The ILA tops, however, will not unleash a wave of labor struggle against the capitalist establishment they depend on, especially right before the election. Instead, they try to play Trump off against Biden/Harris. Expressing dissatisfaction with Biden's intervention into the ILWU contract negotiations last year, Daggett recently had a friendly talk with Trump. This is no way forward for longshoremen—Trump is explicitly anti-union, while Biden and Harris smile and stick the knife in labor's back. The ILA can win real gains, but it

needs leaders who don't glad-hand capitalist politicians and maintain the divisions inside the union.

Next Steps for the ILA

As Karl Marx said, "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." The labor movement must unite the struggle for black freedom with the struggle for workers' emancipation. To carry this out requires a class-struggle leadership and begins with fighting today to advance the interests of black people and all workers against the common enemy. ■

Police Brutality How to Get Justice



January 14: United-front protest demands “Justice for Eric Duprey” at opening of “cooler killer” cop Duran’s trial in Bronx. Rally initiated by OPA Committee-NYC and BLM Greater NY.

From the killing of Sonya Massey in Illinois to the brutal assault of NFL Dolphins player Tyreek Hill, cops continue to murder and attack black people as they please. Something must be done. The Spartacist League/U.S. has initiated the Open Police Archives (OPA) campaign to rebuild the movement against police terror. During our work, we have encountered families and activists who desperately want justice for their loved ones.

In all of these cases, families have been fighting for years, with no success. At the 10th anniversary of the killing of Michael Brown, his father, Michael Brown Sr. said: “The whole setup is supposed to break you—what it does to the parents is supposed to break you. It’s a life sentence that I’m living. The cops are never wrong. They’re consistently killing us—every 26 hours a black person is killed—every day.” The families want the cops who killed their loved ones to be jailed. They want the cops’ secret files opened and all trumped-up charges dropped. They want to put an end to police brutality.

The question is: how do you do all that? The lack of justice isn’t for lack of trying. In fact, the fight and courage these families show is commendable. But the

methods being used are the fundamental obstacle to making progress.

The Road to Nowhere

People think the road to justice goes through the courts, city councils, Democratic Party politicians and D.A.s, who all claim that they’ll do something to help and make sure “this never happens again.” But cases are dragged out for years with no answers, and cover-ups happen all the time—like the one by the Louisiana governor and D.A. in the case of Ronald Greene. Cops are constantly framing up black people, like Mumia Abu-Jamal and the Central Park 5, while killer cops get off scot-free. If they are charged, the charges get dropped. Sometimes, the D.A. straight-up rules that the cops had every right to kill, like in the case of Daviri Robertson, who was killed by the police in 2019. The courts cannot be trusted.

Organizations like the NAACP and BLM say that electing more Democrats, especially black ones, to pass legislation to rein in the cops or making the police “accountable” to the community will help curb police brutality. But this has done nothing to even slow cop terror. People

say that Kamala Harris is a “lesser evil” to Trump because of the bogeyman of Project 2025. People fear he will give full immunity to the police. But the cops are already allowed to kill and get away with it. Kamala, former top cop in California, is clear that she fully supports the cops—just listen to her “tough on crime” rants or look at her record as a prosecutor. She made her career by locking up black people on trumped-up charges in the Bay Area and will continue to enforce police terror. Kamala’s record clearly shows that all skinfolks ain’t kinfolks.

Things turn out this way not because bad people have bad ideas or the wrong people are in positions of authority but because of the *class* interests that the Democratic and Republican politicians, cops and courts represent. There are two classes in society. The capitalist class owns and controls the banks, mines and factories. The working class makes everything and is exploited by the capitalists. Their interests are totally at odds. The cops and courts will never be neutral—they exist to protect and serve the capitalist class and keep them in power.

Any strategy that relies on the tools of the oppressors can only lead to defeat.

Just look at what happened to BLM. A main slogan was “defund the police,” i.e., cop reform. BLM’s whole approach was to gather up all “pro-black,” “anti-racist” elements—from activists in the streets to Joe Biden in the White House—to take this up. Making a coalition with capitalist forces, no matter how “progressive,” was doomed to fail because these forces will never do anything to jeopardize their own interests, which include keeping black people down.

The idea of BLM was that the cops could somehow be “reformed” and the Democratic politicians would fight for black rights. Both proved wrong. It is a deadly illusion that the cops and courts (the capitalist state) can be made to stop serving the class that they exist to protect. The cops that gun down black people aren’t just a “few bad apples.” The problem isn’t a lack of regulations and sensitivity training or a “bad” police chief. Police terror is an essential part of enforcing black oppression in this country.

Cop reform schemes just rope black people and workers into the state machine that oppresses them. This includes “community control of the police,” tinkering with the cops’ budgets, and civilian review boards. People wait for rulings from civilian review boards that end up not mattering anyway, because the state just overrules anything they don’t like. Members of these boards are fired when they timidly ask questions about delays in cases that go on for years. Mayor of New York Eric Adams fired Arva Rice for daring to ask why the evidence from the Kawaski Trawick case was delayed for five years. These boards are powerless and ineffective—and it cannot be any other way. All that BLM’s strategy achieved was demoralization and disorganization.

The Road Forward— Class Struggle

There is another road available—the road of class struggle—which can actually bring justice. OPA seeks to rebuild the movement on this basis. Class struggle means fighting back in ways that rely not on getting the courts, cops and politicians to “do the right thing” but rather on mobilizing the power of the multiracial working class. While we don’t rule out using the courts to our advantage, we have no illusions in the “justice” system.

To fight back against police terror and black oppression, what’s needed is to unite the broadest forces who stand on the side of black people—crucially including the multiracial working class. To be clear why, it is important to know what the source of the problem is. Black people are not oppressed because racists



Open Police Archives

Transit Workers for a Fighting Union join protesters demanding “Justice for Eric Duprey.” OPA campaigns to mobilize workers in defense of cop terror victims.

are in the White House (although they are) or because white people have bad ideas (although some do). In this country, black people are segregated at the bottom of society. They’re stuck in bad neighborhoods, schools and jobs, have access only to the worst healthcare and suffer constant racist police terror and mass incarceration.

The only way to fight any of this is to attack the source of the problem: capitalist class rule. The capitalist class uses black oppression to stay in power by keeping the country divided along racial lines. Instead of fighting against their real enemy, the capitalist class, workers are kept at each other’s throats. The capitalists and their politicians push the lie that black people bring conditions down for white people and that white people are to blame for black oppression in order to hide the fact that they are responsible for both.

Some black people don’t think that the white people in the working class have any reason to fight for them, but this couldn’t be more untrue. White workers and black people share a common enemy. The more segregated and worse off the black population, the more it brings down conditions for the working class as a whole, including white workers. The only way white workers can improve their situation is by fighting against black oppression. This provides white workers every reason to actively defend black people against racist cop terror—even if most are not on board right now. In turn, black people need white workers not only to defend them, but also to fight for their liberation.

The working class has the power and interest to make real advances in the strug-

gle against police brutality and black oppression. The very same cops and courts that terrorize black people attack workers when they take militant actions for a better life. We seek to get the workers movement to publicize, agitate, demonstrate and strike for justice—which will also put it in a better position to wage its own battles. But this must be organized against the capitalist forces and all their dirty tricks.

You cannot fight against police brutality in an alliance with the same forces perpetrating it, you must fight to land a blow against them in order to move forward. But this point is not obvious to everyone. People must see for themselves which side “progressive” politicians, who give lip service to black people, stand on. This is why we started our Open Police Archives campaign: to expose false “friends of black people” and draw the working class into the black struggle, so it can win some victories and create a strong movement to confront segregation and exploitation.

Put the “Progressives” to the Test

We want to rebuild the movement against police brutality in a way that can actually succeed. We want to show in action what kind of methods are needed to get justice. Exposing the cops’ dirty deeds is a basic act of self-defense for black people and the oppressed. It is also a red line that even the most “progressive” politicians do not want to cross. That’s why there are so many cover-ups and sealed files that the families of victims are not allowed to see. Just look at the case of Eric Garner, whose grand jury files are still sealed.

There are politicians who claim to fight on behalf of black people. So, why don't they actually do something to prove it? Why don't they open the police archives and show where they really stand once and for all? Let's take Pamela Price, the Alameda County D.A. She got into office by pushing the police reform politics of BLM. She promised to make things better for black people and stop police violence. Clearly, that hasn't happened. She reopened some cases of police brutality and promised to jail the cops responsible, like those in the case of Mario Gonzalez, who was asphyxiated by Alameda cops in 2021 after they wrestled and pinned him to the ground. What has happened? Absolutely nothing.

Price is currently facing a recall election *not* because she failed black people, but because she's "too soft on crime." There is a movement to defend her from the right-wing recall. We say to those who defend Price: If you think she really doesn't deserve to be recalled, then make her actually do something in defense of black people. Demand that she open the police archives and jail the killer cops in Oakland! Make her show where she stands. Locking up their own thugs, like opening the police archives is also a red line that capitalist politicians don't want to cross. They are not about to throw the cops in jail for doing their jobs in service to the ruling class.

Some activists call for things that sound like what we're saying, but their purpose is to mobilize people under the same bankrupt politics of BLM. They want to

get a "progressive" D.A. into office or vote for Democrats. We know where this road leads...nowhere. Our purpose in calling to "open the police archives" and "jail the killer cops" is to *expose* who the real enemy is and why we need to move forward without them. Mobilizing longshore workers in the Bay Area to take action, independent of and against capitalist politicians and state authorities, would do far more to bring justice for these families than any politician, court or city council could ever achieve.

Open the Police Archives!

The case of Eric Garner has a direct connection to the working class. Garner comes from a transit family, and the powerful New York City transit union could cause some real grief for the capitalists and make real progress in opening up his sealed grand jury files. But why hasn't the union leadership mobilized the membership behind his case? It's because unions across the country are run by people who do not want to cause trouble for the capitalist class. That is why there have been no labor mobilizations to make the capitalists concede to demands in defense of black rights. The union leadership is another reason the movement against police brutality is at an impasse. As part of rallying the unions to take up the fight for justice, there must be a struggle in the unions to replace the current union leadership with a class-struggle one.

It is absolutely essential to bring the fight for justice for victims of police brutality into the working class. Each

individual case of police brutality must be connected to the fight against black oppression and the cause of labor as a whole. The fight against police brutality and black oppression more broadly is of direct importance to the working class. The more that these cases are taken up and seen as a cause of labor, the stronger the labor movement will be.

Getting these cases to take root in the working class will be a process requiring patience and persistence. The first step is to publicize these cases in unions and working-class communities. Making these connections is planting the seeds to rebuild the movement against police brutality in a way that can actually bring about justice.

To this end, we have launched OPA committees in each of the cities where the SL/U.S. is located (NYC, L.A., Chicago and Oakland). The OPA committees will seek to expose the bankruptcy of relying on the Democrats and police reform, while fighting in the interests of workers, black people and all the oppressed to get justice. These committees will be organized around the following demands:

- Open all the police archives!
- The 100 most heinous cases in every city must be open to public scrutiny!
- For united multiracial class-struggle defense!

The committees will hold regular public meetings to discuss the campaign and map out its next steps. See contact details below for more information and to get involved. We also encourage all those who agree with the above perspective to launch their own OPA committees where they are. ■

GET INVOLVED!

Join your local OPA Committee

- Open all the police archives!
- The 100 most heinous cases in every city must be open to public scrutiny!
- For united multiracial class-struggle defense!

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Bringing the Fight to Free Mumia to a New Generation

Printed below is an edited presentation by Lital Singer of the Spartacist League at the Partisan Defense Committee's January 24 Holiday Appeal for Class-War Prisoners in New York City.

In 1999, many thousands marched in the streets of Philly and San Francisco chanting, “brick by brick, wall by wall, we’re gonna free Mumia Abu-Jamal!” And I was one of those protesting, having been radicalized by his case as a college student. Many of us were. We listened to his truth-telling commentaries, we read his book *Live from Death Row*, and we listened to Rage Against the Machine scream out in the song, “Voice of the Voiceless”: “My panther, my brother, we are at war until you’re free.” His case exposed many of my generation to the complete lack of justice in the racist capitalist courts.

Yet today it is rare to find a young activist who knows who Mumia is. This will not do. We must bring the fight to free Mumia and the lessons of this struggle to this generation of youth who face increased state repression. The fight for his freedom is connected to the fight against racist cop terror and black oppression, a key foundation of American capitalism. Today, black people are a key target in Trump’s America.

So who is Mumia: he is a prize-winning journalist, and was a Black Panther Party (BPP) spokesman in his youth. He was a supporter of the MOVE organization and defiant opponent of racist state terror. And he was railroaded to death row in 1982 at the hands of Philadelphia’s notorious cop and court frame-up machine on false charges of killing Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner.

You can better understand the state frame-up and persecution of Mumia by understanding what was happening in the lead-up to and during the early 1980s. Reagan was elected president in 1980 riding a wave of conservative backlash to the civil rights movement. The crushing of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike was a defining moment for what was in store for labor struggle and conditions



James/Philadelphia Inquirer

Mumia Abu-Jamal in 1969, age 14, Minister of Information for Philadelphia Black Panther Party. Mumia, a Panther in his youth, award-winning journalist and MOVE supporter, remains a fighter for the oppressed to this day.

for the black, brown and white working masses. But a lot of working people supported Reagan and the entire country had shifted to the right. Reagan’s election was also the green light for KKK and Nazi fascists to emerge from their holes. In this period, the decimation of jobs, together with Reagan’s austerity measures and “war on crime,” brought intensified ghettoization and an increase in gangs, drugs and racist police terror and occupation.

Now Philly itself was a bastion of racist reaction. The city’s capitalist rulers consciously pushed racial divisions to pit white workers against black workers, and of course this continues today. Ethnic and racial hostilities in Philly were made even worse with the gutting of its heavy industry. In this context, the racist bonapartism of the Philly Police Department got even worse as the cops were deployed to keep the lid on this pressure cooker of discontent. And the cops were also corrupt as hell.

The police and FBI had Mumia in their sights since his Black Panther youth and continued their vendetta as he became known as “the voice of the voiceless.”

He was a known radio journalist for eight years before his frame-up and *Philadelphia Magazine* listed him in 1981 as a man to watch because of his “eloquent, often passionate, and always insightful interviews.” He was also known for covering the story of MOVE and had become a supporter of the group, defending them against the state’s targeting them as black radicals. Since MOVE’s founding in 1972, the mostly black, back-to-nature organization was hounded by the government. This was under Democrat Frank Rizzo, Philadelphia’s notoriously racist mayor and former police chief.

In 1978, the MOVE 9 were framed up on bogus conspiracy and murder charges stemming from the killing of an officer who died in the cops’ own crossfire during a murderous police assault on their home. Despite evidence of their innocence, the MOVE 9 were sentenced to 30 to 100 years behind bars. For years, they were continually denied parole for refusing to confess to a crime they did not commit. Imprisoned MOVE members were also among the first recipients of the

Partisan Defense Committee's class-war prisoner stipend program. This sinister vendetta against black radicals extended to MOVE supporters like Mumia Abu-Jamal, who stood alone among journalists in defense of MOVE.

Philadelphia was notorious for its killer cops. Foremost among them were those in the Stakeout unit, an urban death squad made up largely of veteran military sharpshooters. This squad was established by Rizzo and, together with the department's "red squad," spearheaded the brutal repression of the Panthers and other black militants in the city. Later, when the police turned their attention to MOVE, Stakeout cops again played a forward role, from the vicious beating of Delbert Africa to the shooting in the Osage Avenue alley seven years later.

The worst attack on MOVE came in 1985, when their Osage Avenue home was bombed by the FBI and the cops under black Democratic mayor Wilson Goode. Yes, a bomb was literally dropped on their home. It was the culmination of a daylong police siege, during which over 10,000 rounds of ammunition had been pumped into the house and the Fire Department was under orders to "let the fire burn." The operation to "evict" those inside MOVE's home began with the proclamation: "Attention, MOVE. This is America!" In the ensuing inferno, eleven people were incinerated, including five children, and hundreds were left homeless as an entire city block in the black working-class neighborhood was reduced to ashes. None of the perpetrators ever faced charges, while Ramona Africa, the sole adult survivor, was arrested and served every day of a seven-year prison sentence.

I recommend the documentary *Let the Fire Burn* to learn more about what happened. We in the Spartacist League tried to sear this atrocity into the memory of the working class. As we wrote in our front-page article, "Philly Inferno: Racist Murder!": "The Osage Avenue massacre was supposed to be a message to anybody who gets 'out of line' in Reagan's America—blacks will get the Philly treatment, labor will get the PATCO treatment, and everyone, not least the Marxists, will get the 'terrorist' treatment" (WV No. 380, 31 May 1985).

What I'm trying to show here is the context in which Mumia was targeted and framed up. What happened to Mumia was a key part of what was happening to black fighters that dared defy the new neoliberal reactionary period. Either you got with the liberal program and became one with the system, or you would be jailed and worse.

I'm not going to go into all the mountains of evidence that show Mumia is



PDC

Mumia has been locked up for over 44 years. Photo from PDC visit in November 2025.

innocent and really expose the frame-up. But I'll give some examples of the racism that saturated his trial and appeals, proving that Mumia, like Dred Scott in 1857, has no rights that a court is bound to respect. There was the blatant racism of the late "hanging judge" Albert Sabo, himself a member of the Fraternal Order of Police (F.O.P.). Sabo presided over Mumia's 1982 trial and again at his post-conviction (PCRA) hearings in the 1990s. There's an affidavit of a court reporter who said at the time of the trial she overheard Sabo say, "I'm going to help them fry the n---r."

The prosecutor also engaged in blatant racist jury-rigging at the trial. Excluding black jurors was an official policy of the Philly D.A.'s office and this was the practice throughout the '80s. The prosecution also made the outrageous closing argument that the jury should err on the side of convicting Mumia because he would have "appeal after appeal." This argument blatantly erased the reasonable doubt standard, telling the jury that in case of doubt they should convict Mumia.

Mumia was also sentenced to death row explicitly for his political views as prosecutors painted a lying portrait of Mumia as a committed "cop killer" from the time he was a 15-year-old BPP spokesman. Mumia was given an execution date in 1995 and there were mass mobilizations with many unions signing on against the death penalty and to save Mumia, so a stay of execution was granted. Again in 1999 another execution date was set, and once again as I mentioned at the beginning, there were mass mobilizations of thousands in the streets. Mumia was the most renowned death row prisoner, not just here but around the world. In 2001, a

judge threw out his death penalty sentence while upholding his frame-up conviction. This was fought by the Philly D.A., and it wasn't until 2011 that they dropped trying to legally lynch him and condemned him to life without parole—"slow motion death row," as Mumia calls it.

Over the decades the courts have ignored the overwhelming evidence that Mumia is an innocent man and the victim of a massive frame-up. They have refused to hear the sworn confession of Arnold Beverly that he, not Mumia, shot and killed Daniel Faulkner. Court after court has shredded legal precedents and well-settled rules and created new "Mumia rules" to deny his appeals and keep him buried in prison.

Much of the movement for Mumia was devoted to opposing the death penalty and being for a new trial, which many a liberal could and did advocate in the 1990s. And when the executioner's threat was no longer present, the liberals in the movement did what they always do, they abandoned Mumia. Because, for liberals, the fight for Mumia was one of moral injustice, a racist "aberration." They looked to legal means to address it, so when legal means went as far as they could, the liberals were gone. While we were for pursuing all legal means, our strategy was a class-struggle one.

But the other thing to understand *vis-à-vis* what happened to the movement to free Mumia was what was happening from the 1990s to the late 2000s. You had a change in the '90s from Reagan's neoliberalism with a cold, mean face to neoliberal policy with a progressive, nice face. This was captured by Bill "I feel your pain" Clinton, who, while campaigning for president in 1992, flew back to Arkansas to personally oversee the execution of a brain-damaged black man, Ricky Ray Rector. Clinton also signed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which greatly curtailed *habeas corpus* rights for death row inmates, including Mumia.

As Marxists, we stand for the abolition of the death penalty in principle—for the guilty as well as the innocent. We do not give the state the right to determine who lives and who dies. The lynching of American black men—by racist mobs and by the courts—is deeply entrenched in this country's history. In the U.S., capital punishment is the lynch rope made legal, with black people making up over 40 percent of the death row population. Today, while there are fewer people being sentenced to death row, the racial disparity has actually increased. From 1976 to 1986, 51 percent of the people sentenced to death in Texas were people of color; as of five years ago that percentage grew to 75 percent. In California, the percentage

increased from 52 percent to 78 percent; in Oklahoma, it more than doubled from 28 percent to 80 percent.

This period of the 1990s and 2000s was really one of relative stability for U.S. imperialism, the hegemonic world power. Ever since the overturn of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, when bourgeois ideologues declared the “death of communism” and the “end of history,” liberalism has been the dominant ruling-class ideology. And it was liberal principles that were used to trample on the national rights of oppressed countries, deindustrialize the West, import cheap labor and open markets to imperialist capital and goods. What did the left do in this period? It basically bought into all this and it did not build opposition to all the liberal triumphalism.

So you can see a problem: you can’t both tail liberalism and its world order and at the same time effectively struggle to free the victims of this order, which Mumia was. You can’t imbibe in the hope of Obama and that we’re gradually eliminating racism, that we’re 90 percent of the way there (a cruel joke today). You can’t promote that and also fight for Mumia, whose decades-long incarceration serves as a stark testimony to the fact that that’s a lie.

Many of the years that Mumia has languished in a jail cell have been during this period of relative stabilization for the ruling class. But the U.S. imperialists also sowed the seeds of their own crisis, which we are seeing now. They have caused a crisis by hollowing out their industry over the past decades, but there needs to be industry to maintain the U.S. as the dominant power. Today Trump is setting U.S. imperialism on a war footing both abroad, attacking Venezuela and abducting Maduro, and at home, as ICE brutally rampages through the streets of America. He is reversing globalization, breaking with liberal values and institutions and moving to confront China. This is what Trump represents and this is why today the liberal status quo is being destroyed and replaced by rightward reaction. Like in the 1980s, there has also been a rightward shift in society. Many working people got fed up with worsening living conditions and decades full of the liberals’ lying promises and just utter betrayal of the fight for black equality and for immigrant rights.

The fight to free Mumia and all the victims of this racist injustice system can’t be based on moral appeals, it must be based on the understanding that the oppression of black people is a tool to keep the whole working class down. White workers and immigrant workers have every interest in fighting it as key to fighting their own exploitation at the hands of the same

enemy. The Panthers had many liberal advocates who abandoned them. All the liberal Democrats who once took a knee won’t even talk about black lives; it’s too “divisive” now.

To effectively fight back against the current attacks by Trump, you have to break with the liberals that caused the reaction we see now. Endless talk about diversity and multiculturalism and multiracial unity while at the same time pitting one group against the other for a slice of the ever-shrinking pie has only caused resentment and reaction. There are lessons to learn from the past decades: that you can’t fight racist oppression of black people, immigrants and Latinos, or attacks on the working class by relying on liberal forces. It will lead to defeat every time.

At the same time, the reality is that Mumia doesn’t have any obvious legal options left. But he is not broken and he still fights to use his writing to advance the black struggle and the struggles of working people and all the victims of U.S. imperialism. Jon Piper and I saw Mumia a few months ago. Given that his case politicized me, it was really an honor to finally meet him. But it was also very painful to see him still locked up. He is working on a dissertation for his PhD on Frantz Fanon and we talked about the importance of the anti-colonial struggle today. I had told him about a recent trip we did to Puerto Rico, where there was a sizeable independence march for the first time in many years and there were posters for a play about Fanon all over the streets of San Juan. We talked about the world, about Trump and the turn to reaction. He said things were at a turning point and we agreed that the situation was likely going to get worse before it got better.

Mumia also did an interview this summer with *Rolling Stone* magazine. The interviewer asked about how under Trump “assumed bedrock principles like due process, a trial, a jury of our peers, appear to be casualties of his justice department.” And Mumia replied:

“The truth of the matter is that there has always been rhetoric about due process, the right to a jury of one’s peers, and other protections offered by the constitution. But it doesn’t matter what the constitution says, what matters is what it does. There is rhetoric and there is reality, and those two rivers rarely meet. When I hear about due process, my mind automatically goes not to me and my case but to Fred Hampton, the former chairman of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, who was killed in his bed by the government for being a Black Panther. That was Dec. 4, 1969. I speak as someone who didn’t just read articles about it. I was one of four Panthers from Philadelphia who traveled to Chicago immediately after hearing of his assassination and we

stood in that house within hours of the state’s execution of Fred Hampton. We stood within two feet of his blood-soaked mattress, and not far from the door that looked like Swiss cheese because automatic weapon fire had ripped through it in the early hours of the morning. Due process, my ass.”

So it’s at this time that we need to do what we can to keep Mumia’s fight for freedom alive and connected to the active struggles against ICE, against mass incarceration, against police brutality and to open all police archives, against segregation and for black equality. Of course, seeing thousands in the streets of Minneapolis yesterday mobilize in bitter cold against ICE is inspiring, but if these struggles are tied to the liberal forces that caused this crisis to begin with, it will not succeed. This is the key lesson of the movement to free Mumia, which we have seen play out throughout the past few decades: when the left looks to an alliance with liberals to save us, we all will go down.

The only thing that will save us is integrated class struggle and to have as our guiding purpose for black, brown and labor power to run this country. Many leftists make it seem as though the union leaders, who haven’t waged any struggle for years as workers and the oppressed have been wrecked, are now gonna lead a national general strike. Let’s get real, what we are facing is going to get worse. And we actually need to win the working class and oppressed to this struggle.

I’ll end with this point from Assata Shakur, another black freedom fighter who only got out of the state’s clutches by successfully fleeing to Cuba, where she recently died. After her death, many liberals heaped fake praise on her. But you know she told the truth, she said: “Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them.”

That understanding is what must guide the new generation of fighters against racist capitalist injustice. **Free Mumia!** ■

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Donate to Mumia via JPay:

<https://www.jpays.com/FirstTime.aspx?Search=AM8335&State=PA>

Listen to Mumia’s
Commentaries on
Prison Radio:



Assata Shakur

1947-2025

by L. Davidson
and D. Reed

Assata Shakur, iconic black freedom fighter, former Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army militant, died last September 25 in Havana, Cuba. Pursued relentlessly for decades by the U.S. rulers, the first woman on the FBI's "Most Wanted Terrorists List," framed repeatedly on false charges, shot, imprisoned, tortured—Assata remained unbroken. She has inspired generations, especially militant black women, with her courage and revolutionary spirit. Despite vast political differences, we honor Assata as a fearless enemy of the capitalist/imperialist order and a warrior for black emancipation.

Growing up with her mother and aunt in Jamaica, Queens and with her grandparents in segregated North Carolina, Assata experienced the realities of race discrimination. She came to political activism as a student in New York City in the 1960s, spurred by a keen awareness of black oppression, but also a broader understanding of class oppression under capitalism. As she wrote in her powerful 1987 autobiography:

"...it didn't take too much brains to figure out that Black people are oppressed because of class as well as race, because we are poor and because we are Black. It would burn me up every time somebody talked about Black people climbing the ladder of success. Anytime you're talking about a ladder, you're talking about a top and a bottom, an upper class and a lower class, a rich class and a poor class. As long as you've got a system with a top and a bottom, Black people are always going to wind up at the bottom, because we're the easiest to discriminate against."

In the fall of 1970 Assata joined the Black Panther Party (BPP), which represented the best of a generation of black militants who rebelled against the pacifism of the liberal-led civil rights movement. Formerly known as JoAnne Chesimard, in 1971 she adopted her new name, Assata Olugbala Shakur. Assata for "she who struggles," Olugbala meaning "love for the people," and Shakur out of respect



Warrior for Black Liberation

Adama Delphine Fawundu

for her comrade Zayd Malik Shakur and his family. Assata's close friend Afeni Shakur was a Panther leader, and Assata was godmother to Afeni's son, rapper Tupac Shakur.

The black nationalist groups of the 1960s and 1970s attracted black women like Assata, who formed the backbone of the Panther organization and played leading roles despite the prevalence of macho views among male comrades, which reflected the attitudes of the lumpenized ghetto youth they were recruiting. Panther women, over half the membership, were often rankled by the chauvinist disdain of male comrades. Opposition to birth control and abortion rights reflected these backward views. That said, Assata felt "the BPP was the most progressive organization at that time...many of the

other organizations at the time were so sexist, I mean to the extreme."

Savage Repression of Black Militants

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover called the Panthers the "greatest threat to the internal security of the U.S." As we wrote in "FBI's Racist 'Anti-Terror' Vendetta Against Assata Shakur" (*Workers Vanguard* No. 1024, 17 May 2013): "In the eyes of the capitalist rulers, the great crime of the Panthers was not only proclaiming the need for a revolutionary solution to the oppression of black people but advocating the right of armed self-defense against the racist terrorists, whether in the white robes of the KKK or the navy blue of the police."

Hoover described the aim of the FBI's deadly "counter-intelligence program" COINTELPRO: "to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of the black nationalists." Assata and her comrades were targeted for assassination by the FBI and cops under the deadly COINTELPRO, which led to the murder of at least 28 Black Panther militants. Fred Hampton, Bobby Hutton, Mark Clark, Bunchy Carter, John Huggins—these are only a few of the Panthers murdered in the bloodthirsty drive to destroy the BPP.

The entire New York Panther leadership was jailed, facing absurd charges of planning to blow up NYC sites like the Bronx Botanical Garden. Known as the Panther 21, they were imprisoned on these phony charges; once they went to trial, the jury acquitted them immediately.

The BPP shattered under this murderous state repression. Shakur became disillusioned with the infighting, machismo and lack of direction. She left the party and joined other militants, primarily from the militant Cleaver wing of the Panthers, in the loosely organized group of underground black militants known as the Black Liberation Army (BLA). Following a string of cop killings and bank robberies in NYC which were blamed on the BLA, her image was displayed

throughout New York post offices, banks and subway stations, as she was made the target of a nationwide manhunt with shoot-to-kill orders.

On 2 May 1973, Shakur, Zayd and Sundiata Acoli—former Panthers, then with the BLA—were stopped by two state troopers on the New Jersey Turnpike, supposedly for a “faulty taillight.” Moments later, Zayd Shakur was shot dead by one trooper. The second trooper died in the crossfire, shot with a bullet from a police revolver. Assata was shot twice, once in the back.

Sundiata Acoli’s case was carried forward, while Assata’s was delayed because she was pregnant. Sundiata had been finance minister of the Harlem BPP, and was one of the Panther 21 defendants. He was convicted of murder by an overwhelmingly white jury, and was imprisoned for 49 years until finally being paroled at age 85 in 2022.

Assata’s injuries showed she had been shot while her hands were raised. Physical evidence proved she had not held or fired a gun. One bullet shattered her clavicle and median nerve, paralyzing her right arm, making it impossible for her to have fired the fatal shot. Unable to convict her of firing the shot that killed the trooper, an all-white jury, five of them relatives or personal friends of NJ state troopers, railroaded her to prison as an “accomplice” on grotesque charges of killing her own comrade Zayd as well as the state trooper.

But while awaiting trial on these trumped-up charges, Assata faced nine other frame-up indictments, winning acquittals and dismissals in all nine cases. A 1989 book by Kenneth O’Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI’s Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972*, cited docu-



Cortez/AP

New Jersey State Police press conference on 2 May 2013 announced police/Feds bounty on Shakur increased to \$2 million.

mentary evidence suggesting that Shakur was targeted with an investigation called CHESROB, which “attempted to hook former New York Panther Joanne Chesimard (Assata Shakur) to virtually every bank robbery or other violent crime involving a black woman on the East Coast.”

Assata was imprisoned for more than six and a half years altogether, including over two years in solitary confinement, largely in men’s prisons. Held under appalling conditions, she was beaten, tortured physically and psychologically, denied medical care and visits by her attorney and family were monitored. And she suffered the pain of separation from her daughter, born while Assata was in prison.

Assata escaped from prison in New Jersey in 1979 with the assistance of activists with the BLA and the May 19th Communist Organization. Several of those aiding her paid a high price. Mutulu Shakur, jailed for the 1981 Brinks robbery as well

as his role in gaining Assata’s freedom, spent 37 years in prison; he was paroled in 2022 for ill health and died soon thereafter. Marilyn Buck also faced a RICO indictment for these actions and was sentenced to 80 years; she died of cancer within a month of her release in 2010.

Eschewing the integrated working class as the force for revolutionary change and failing to rally the ghetto masses behind them, the Panthers found themselves isolated, to be picked off by the forces of police terror. A similar tragic fate befell the BLA, which engaged in symbolic acts but remained divorced from mass struggle.

We vigorously defended the Panthers against the capitalist state’s murderous drive to crush black radicalism. In the 1970s we defended Assata and her comrades, and protested her horrendous treatment at the Middlesex NJ prison. We denounced her conviction on false charges, and continued to defend her courageous stance during her years of exile in Cuba.

Refuge in Cuba

Assata was granted political asylum in Cuba in 1984, where she lived until her death last autumn. She continued to speak out against U.S. imperialist crimes and in support of political prisoners. In a 1998 open letter she declared, “I am a 20th century escaped slave. Because of government persecution, I was left with no other choice than to flee from the political repression, racism and violence that dominate the U.S. government’s policy towards people of color.”

Living and working as a teacher in Cuba, Assata became fluent in Spanish, took part in many political and cultural celebrations, and worked with the Cuban Communist Party. She was finally able to reunite with her daughter Kakuya Shakur.

The U.S. rulers did not end their relentless persecution of Assata after she



Hamburg/NY Daily News

3 May 1973: Assata’s car after deadly stop by NJ state troopers. Cops shot Assata twice, once in the back, and killed Zayd Malik Shakur.

reached Cuba. And this persecution was always bipartisan—both Democratic and Republican administrations targeted her. Congress passed a resolution demanding her extradition from Cuba; her presence there was linked to continuing the embargo aimed at starving the Cuban population. It was the administration of Obama, the first black president, and his black attorney general that put Assata on the FBI's list of "Most Wanted Terrorists" and offered a \$2 million bounty for her capture. In 2013 a senior FBI official complained that in Cuba she had continued to voice her "anti-U.S. views" advocating "revolution and terrorism," and called her "a danger to the American government." In the 2013 *Workers Vanguard* article, we explained that this campaign had "a dual purpose: to settle the score against those who fought for black freedom over 40 years ago and to warn that radical activity would be treated as 'domestic terrorism'."

Today, we see the label of "domestic terrorist" again used to smear anyone who

dares to protest against the murderous ICE raids, genocide in Gaza, and police terror against the black population. The ICE murder of Renee Good in Minneapolis is justified by Trump's DHS secretary Noem and by Vance immediately labeling this innocent mother of three as engaging in "domestic terrorism." Today the connections are clearer than ever: bloody repression of protest and intensified oppression of black and brown populations at home, while the imperialist military's full might is wielded against Venezuela to prepare the way for capitalist counterrevolution in Cuba.

In 1991, the two of us were fortunate to meet Assata during a visit to Havana. As we wrote in *Workers Vanguard* No. 531, 19 July 1991:

"We heard a moving talk by black militant Assata Shakur.... For her, the survival of Cuba's revolution is a matter of life or death. She spoke of the many others who find refuge here, like young Salvadoran guerrilla fighters blinded or maimed in combat against the death

squads. To a visitor from the U.S., she said, things may look hard down here. But to a Palestinian from the West Bank, to a Latin American slum dweller, Cuba looks very different."

Our conversation with Assata was a chance to update her on the defense work of the Spartacists and Partisan Defense Committee, and especially our campaign in defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal. After our talk, she asked us to deliver a letter of solidarity with Mumia. It was our great honor to meet Assata, this remarkable warrior, grandmother, teacher, poet, fearless black revolutionary.

Today, in the belly of the imperialist beast, Shakur's words live on, known widely among fighters for black liberation as "Assata's Chant":

"It is our duty to fight for our freedom.

It is our duty to win.

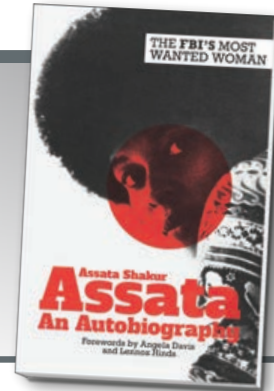
We must love each other and support each other.

We have nothing to lose but our chains."

We reprint below the communiqué "To My People" written by Assata Shakur while in prison, 4 July 1973.

To My People

by Assata Shakur



Black brothers, Black sisters, i want you to know that i love you and i hope that somewhere in your hearts you have love for me. My name is Assata Shakur (slave name joanne chesimard), and i am a revolutionary. A Black revolutionary. By that i mean that i have declared war on all forces that have raped our women, castrated our men, and kept our babies empty-bellied.

I have declared war on the rich who prosper on our poverty, the politicians who lie to us with smiling faces, and all the mindless, heartless robots who protect them and their property.

I am a Black revolutionary, and, as such, i am a victim of all the wrath, hatred, and slander that amerika is capable of. Like all other Black revolutionaries, amerika is trying to lynch me.

I am a Black revolutionary woman, and because of this i have been charged with and accused of every alleged crime in which a woman was believed to have participated. The alleged crimes in which only men were supposedly involved, i have been accused of planning. They have plastered pictures alleged to be me in post offices, airports, hotels, police cars, subways, banks, television, and newspapers. They have offered over fifty thousand dollars in rewards for my capture and they have issued orders to shoot on sight and shoot to kill.

I am a Black revolutionary, and, by definition, that makes me a part of the Black Liberation Army. The pigs have used their newspapers and TVs to paint the Black Liberation Army as vicious, brutal, mad-dog criminals. They have called us gangsters and gun molls and have compared us to such characters as

john dillinger and ma barker. It should be clear, it must be clear to anyone who can think, see, or hear, that we are the victims. The victims and not the criminals.

It should also be clear to us by now who the real criminals are. Nixon and his crime partners have murdered hundreds of Third World brothers and sisters in Vietnam, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, and South Africa. As was proved by Watergate, the top law enforcement officials in this country are a lying bunch of criminals. The president, two attorney generals, the head of the fbi, the head of the cia, and half the white house staff have been implicated in the Watergate crimes.

They call us murderers, but we did not murder over two hundred fifty unarmed Black men, women, and children, or wound thousands of others in the riots they provoked during the sixties. The rulers of this country have always considered their property more important than our lives. They call us murderers, but we were not responsible for the twenty-eight brother inmates and nine hostages murdered at attica. They call us murderers, but we did not murder and wound over thirty unarmed Black students at Jackson State—or Southern State, either.

They call us murderers, but we did not murder Martin Luther King, Jr., Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, George Jackson, Nat Turner, James Chaney, and countless others. We did not murder, by shooting in the back, sixteen-year-old Rita Lloyd, eleven-year-old Rickie Boddin, or ten-year-old Clifford Glover. They call us murderers, but we do not control or enforce a system

Community Control...

(continued from page 56)

into the FRSO. On occasion, we have worked with them together with families of victims of police terror. One of the most frequent debates that we have with members of the FRSO and NAARPR is over the question of community control of the police.

The aspiration of black communities to control the cops who patrol their streets is not inherently detrimental to the black struggle, but how it has been fought for is. But this raises a big question: How to go from the reality of the situation we are in now to one where cops actually take their orders from the black community?

The pamphlet that members of the FRSO and NAARPR have provided us to explain how to fight for community control is Frank Chapman's *The Historical Roots of Our Struggle for Community Control of the Police*. There are two basic approaches to the fight for community control. The first, which Chapman takes, is to attempt to realign the existing police force and bodies of armed men to be partisans of the inner city and responsive to its concerns—to try to get the existing state forces to switch their allegiance from the ruling class to black people.

The second approach, which we advocate, is to look to build up an alternate force that has its interests aligned with the black population and the multiracial working class from the outset. It would aim to step in and take the place of the existing bodies of armed men when the balance of forces allows. To get a police

force controlled by the black community, you need an alternative power to take over from the capitalist state.

The difference here is whether you are seeking to convert the existing police forces or to replace them. If you understand that you have to replace the cops from top to bottom, then it is necessary to maximize the fighting strength of our side and turn to the primary social force that has a *vested interest* in doing so alongside black people and other oppressed minorities—the working class.

What makes Chapman's essay appealing to young revolutionaries is that he states some basic Marxist truths: "We see the police as not only instruments of class exploitation and protectors of private property; we also see them as perpetrators of racist and political repression and part of the state apparatus enforcing national oppression." OK, but if one understands this to be the case, why advocate for the black community to become embroiled in the existing state apparatus as he later goes on to do? The conclusion that needs to be drawn from the above quote is that there is no gain to be won for black and working people in collusion with the capitalist state or capitalist politicians.

Chapman himself correctly warns against getting "lost in a maze of fantasy about reimagining policing in a class ridden, racist, sexist society"—only to go on to push legislative efforts to reimagine policing in deeply class-divided and highly segregated Chicago. This reimagining is not the road to revolution but to ruin for the black struggle.

Finish the Civil War!

Chapman begins his essay by claiming that the activity of the NAARPR stands in the tradition of Radical Reconstruction,

the Russian Revolution, the Panthers and more. In fact, what these historical examples show is why the capitalist state must be *replaced* and that any compromise on this question will only set the struggle back. The same goes for any perspective that does not actively try to align the black struggle with that of the working class.

It is fitting that Chapman finds inspiration in Radical Reconstruction, the most democratic period in U.S. history to date and one rich in lessons. First and foremost, this period was made possible by a social revolution—the Civil War. The black regiments of the Union Army were crucial to turning the war's tide and smashing the slavocracy. In the process, the old system of policing based on slave patrols to enforce chattel slavery "was overthrown by revolutionary means" as Chapman puts it and a new system of policing erected in its place.

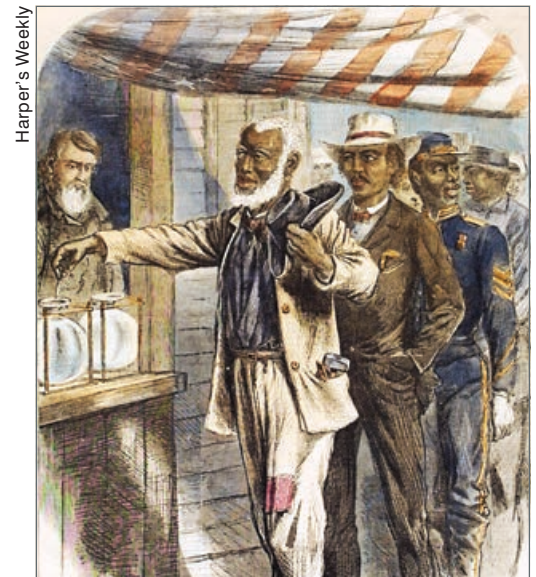
These momentous events shed considerable light on which of the two basic approaches to achieving community control of the police has a chance of success—and which doesn't. New slave catchers had *not* been hired at the initiative of black people—*nor* had the purpose of their patrols been gradually transformed into defense of the black community. Rather, these bodies of armed men were destroyed by an alternate force, the Union Army. In short, the previous police apparatus was not converted, but replaced.

There was more to the story, though, because at the end of the day the Union Army was the instrument of Northern capital, not the black masses. Something was going to have to give. Both capitalist and slave had much to gain from the suppression of the plantation owner but had no further common interests. It was the black masses themselves who, under the



Library of Congress

Radical Reconstruction, most democratic era in U.S. history, was only made possible by Civil War and armed occupation. Left: Montage of majority-black Reconstructed South Carolina legislature, distributed by white supremacists to fuel reaction. Right: Drawing of black people voting in South, 1867.



Harper's Weekly

protective shield of the occupying Union Army, pushed forward the social revolution. As Chapman documents, a degree of black community control was gained in this period. But in 1877, the capitalist masters withdrew the troops from the South for their own purposes. At that point, the heroic freedmen and women did not have the independent strength and organized militias to withstand the ensuing tide of racist reaction. So, counterrevolution took hold. In other words, Radical Reconstruction showed the need to cohere bodies of armed men distinct from those commanded by the ruling class to fully win black freedom.

How to Seize Power

Chapman cites the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution as evidence of the “historic fact that policing can be used to defend the democratic gains of the people.” But again, he skips over its lessons for the black struggle today. This revolution was powerful confirmation that workers and the oppressed are capable of taking control of society and running it in a much better way and for the benefit of their communities.

Under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, the working class seized power in its own name and fought to extend the revolution internationally, liberating the broad masses from all forms of slavery and exploitation. The old order was toppled, but not because the security forces loyal to the capitalist Provisional Government were converted to the side of the insurgent working class. Rather, it was because the soviets (councils of workers and peasants) built up independent forces, the Red Guard detachments and later the Red Army, to replace them at the decisive moment.

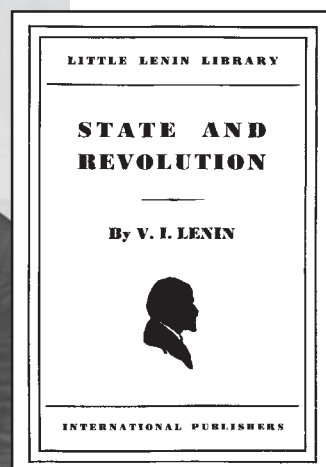
During the whole period, from the tsar’s overthrow in February to the triumph of the working class in October, Lenin focused on strengthening the soviets and their Red Guards as an alternative to the existing government and its security forces. The objective was to get the working and toiling masses to assume an independent attitude toward the capitalist class and concentrate as much power as possible in their hands, even while the official state machinery was still attempting to enforce the commandments of the old regime. This was absolutely indispensable preparation for a successful revolution.

One of the things that Lenin hammered on was the utter futility of ever converting the capitalist police into defenders of the oppressed masses:

“Separated as it is from the people, forming a professional caste of men trained in the practice of violence upon the poor,

**Bolshevik leader
V.I. Lenin in
August 1914.
Inset: *State
and Revolution*
defends basic
Marxism; the
capitalist state
must be smashed
and replaced by
workers’ rule.**

B.D. Vigilev



men who receive somewhat higher pay and the privileges that go with authority (to say nothing of ‘gratuities’), the police everywhere, in every republic, however democratic, where the bourgeoisie is in power, always remains the unflinching weapon, the chief support and protection of the bourgeoisie. No important radical reforms in favor of the working masses can be implemented through the police. That is objectively impossible.”

—“They Have Forgotten the Main Thing,” 18 May 1917 (*Collected Works*, Vol. 24)

Lenin did *not* advocate that the workers and oppressed take control of the liberal bourgeoisie’s attempt to rehire police. Rather, he argued “for the immediate unqualified replacement of the police by a people’s militia.”

It is well worth taking the time to study this history carefully, including Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*. The political strategy that guided the successful Bolshevik Revolution is the same strategy that can win *real* community control of the police in the U.S. And it is the same strategy needed to win black liberation.

ECPS: Stuck in a Hamster Wheel

Let’s consider in greater detail how Chapman conceives of the fight for community control of the police (CCOP). He writes: “Our demand has never been for review or oversight. Our fundamental demand has always been for community control because we come to the table as an oppressed people asserting our unalienable, democratic right as a people to say who polices our communities and how they are policed. This is not about reform.” We agree that the fight for community control should not be about review, oversight and reform of the police.

Indeed, Chicago has numerous police review and oversight committees, commissions and councils, some going back decades, and police tyranny over the black

community continues unabated. Over the years, this country’s rulers have deployed various tactics to derail struggles against state repression. One trick has been to appoint a special commission or council to study, evaluate and assess the latest heinous crimes of the cops, especially those that spark protest. This “independent” investigation drags on, the movement dies down and nothing ever changes.

Unfortunately, the NAARPR appears to have fallen into the very trap that Chapman warns against. According to him, its greatest achievement thus far is the Empowering Communities for Public Safety (ECPS) ordinance adopted by the Chicago City Council in 2021. What did this ordinance do? It created yet another commission, the Community Commission on Public Safety and Accountability (CCPSA), which we are told is “a city-wide body with power over Chicago Police Department policy and the ability to hire and fire the head of the Civilian Office of Police Accountability [COPA]. It also creates elected positions in 22 police districts. Each district can elect 3 people to serve on a district council, making for a total of 66 positions.” This sure sounds like a web of review and oversight bodies. Community members can get elected to serve on an advisory council in their police district and participate in the oversight of other civilian bodies. That’s not control of the police in the slightest.

Many black and Latino Chicagoans joined or otherwise supported the coalition that worked to get the ordinance passed. This is not surprising. Families directly impacted by police brutality want to see something, anything, done to begin to address their demand for justice, and they were told that the ECPS ordinance would promote police accountability to the black community. But this story does not come close to matching the reality on the ground.



Gerima/Fight Back! News

Chicago, January 31: Chapman holding Johnson's executive order asking cops to investigate ICE crimes. These same cops repress black and brown people and anti-ICE protest. This is no step toward community control, it's political theater. ICE, CPD will still terrorize immigrants.

The CCPSA holds public meetings, where people can come to voice their grievances and experiences of police abuse. Usually, someone from the police department or mayor's office is also there. It is all very official, and people can freely express their anger. For anyone who has attended one of the meetings or watched the broadcast, the frustration in the room is palpable and often directed at the CCPSA itself. In response, CCPSA reps inform the attendees that their concerns will be taken under consideration, but in the meantime they need to work with and respect the police. When the meeting ends, everyone goes home and the police keep right on terrorizing the community.

In effect, the CCPSA is a shield for the cops, providing a buffer between them and the seething anger of the community. This is not an exercise in getting the community to gain control, but in getting the community to blow off steam. All this does is divert protest from the streets and keep those who want to fight back entangled in bureaucratic red tape.

Take the example of Dexter Reed, who was gunned down by the cops in 2024 in a hail of **96 bullets** after a "driving while black" traffic stop. His family is still waiting for the COPA to issue a determination on whether there was any wrongdoing by the cops who murdered him. The killer cops were given paid administrative leave while the investigation is ongoing. **No cop has been fired, much less jailed, in any case that the CCPSA has overseen.** This just goes to show that at the end of the day the cops are accountable only to the ruling class.

Democrats: Gravediggers of Black Struggle

When discussing the ECPS campaign, Chapman observes: "Not since the days of Harold Washington running for Mayor

have we been confronted with the challenge of building a powerful grass roots movement for radical, systemic change." Pretty much since its inception, the NAARPR has pushed the election of black Democrats as part of the struggle for CCOP. Back in the 1980s, it was black Chicago mayor Harold Washington. Black people who lived through Washington's tenure in City Hall are well aware that he did nothing for them. These years were marked by steel and auto plant closures, widespread unemployment, rampant crime and relentless cop terror. Police commander Jon Burge, responsible for torturing over a hundred black Chicagoans, thrived under Washington's watch. This is not what "radical systemic change" looks like.

More generally, the long line of black Democratic mayors and city council majorities since the civil rights era has not even begun to transform a single urban center into a mecca for the black population. Regarding former Panther and long-time Chicago Democratic alderman Bobby Rush, Chapman himself acknowledges that "turning organizers into career politicians is not necessarily the road to self-empowerment of the people." We would just add that backing these career politicians in any way is not the road to self-empowerment either. They are in a party that answers to the white ruling class.

When the righteous anger of the Ferguson protests erupted in 2014, the black Democrat in the White House called for calm and condemned violence and looting, while advising the cops and the black community to rebuild trust in one another. To put it another way, as the overseer of the whole plantation, Obama acted to pacify the black rebellion against the modern-day slave patrols. The FRSO told us that the election of Obama would "create a better political climate" (1 November 2008). Instead, liberals like Obama and

his partner-in-crime Biden paved the way for Trump by lecturing working people about their supposed failings while presiding over their economic misery.

In the lead-up to Chicago's April 2023 mayoral election, the FRSO mobilized its community control coalition to get out the vote for Brandon Johnson. Later that year, Chapman wrote:

"Our victory with the election of Mayor Brandon Johnson on April 4th created a crack in the system that has the potential of unleashing the most powerful democratic upsurge of the masses since the Sixties...."

"The main question then is how we bring together the people—the working class and oppressed Black and Brown people—to the playing field with the mayor so we can move forward together to consolidate our gains and start building a real people's movement for jobs, housing and a better life for all Chicagoans."

—"A Word on the Meaning of Political Self-Empowerment for Our Movement," 10 December 2023

But no such upsurge has occurred, and looking to forge black-brown unity in conjunction with the Democratic mayor has more than a little to do with why it has not.

Today, Johnson is widely hated and for good reason. He dumped migrants in black neighborhoods, straining limited resources. This set black and brown Chicagoans at one another's throats. He laid off school staff in public schools starved of funds and raised taxes on working people already choking on inflation. He has not lifted a finger to stop rampant police terror or killings in black communities, like those of Dexter Reed and Timothy Glaze (a 58-year-old man shot 16 times in January 2025). Despite his anti-Trump rhetoric, Johnson let ICE freely rampage through the city's Latino neighborhoods.

Building a real people's movement would be greatly facilitated by not having to make excuses for the Chicago mayor or any other "black face in a high place" who stabs black people in the back. These career politicians bind the black community to the bourgeois establishment, sabotaging black struggle by keeping it within bounds acceptable to the country's elite—the declared enemies of black community control.

The Power of Black and Red

Chapman says that the NAARPR's strategy in the fight for community control of the police continues the legacy of the Black Panther Party. He does so in order to give a revolutionary stamp of approval, by associating the ECPS and other Democratic Party politicking campaigns with the Panthers. We have discussed above the NAARPR's core strat-



Lacking working-class perspective, BPP moved from armed self-defense to Democratic Party. Left: Black Panthers storm California Capitol with arms in hand to protest gun control legislation, 1967. Right: Chairman Bobby Seale campaigning as Democrat for Oakland mayor, April 1973.



egy on its own merits. Here we turn to the legacy of the Panthers.

Of all the historical roots that Chapman identifies to make his approach to the CCOP struggle as attractive as possible, the Panthers appear on the surface to be the most immediate and direct. After all, by 1968 prominent Panthers like Bobby Seale, who Chapman quotes, explicitly called for CCOP through decentralization of police departments and putting them under the command of elected neighborhood councils. The Panthers, together with other left and rad-lib groups, even launched a referendum to implement this perspective in Berkeley, California, that narrowly lost in April 1971. But once again Chapman skips over inconvenient aspects of history.

For a period of time after the Black Panthers first exploded on the scene in 1966, they struggled, in a contradictory way, to remain independent of the bourgeois establishment. The orientation reflected not only their militant nationalism but also a partial but significant leaning toward a *class* opposition to racist capitalist America. As a result, across the country they attracted to their ranks the most committed black freedom fighters of the era. On the one hand, the Panthers fought boldly in an entirely independent manner against the capitalist state—for example, their armed patrols to police the police in black neighborhoods. On the other hand, they did *not* have a program of proletarian revolution to sweep away that state.

In the case of the Panthers, the call for CCOP grew out of their armed neighborhood patrols. Despite their great courage and determination, though, they were pummeled by a massive wave of murderous state repression. At this point, the Panthers could turn in one of two directions—toward the bourgeois establishment or toward the multiracial working class—or go underground in isolation. Seale was a leading spokesman for the wing of the

Panthers that went the first route and increasingly abandoned the organization's independence from the establishment in pursuit of liberal schemes and alliances with Democrats. The Berkeley referendum campaign was an example of just that.

In short, Chapman is engaging in a sleight of hand—he is playing to the attractiveness of the Panthers at the height of their militant struggle *against* the state to dupe us into following a strategy born out of the defeat of that struggle and representing a coming to terms with the powers that be. In contrast to the Panthers, the NAARPR has *never* advocated any form of independent struggle against the state. Rather, it focuses entirely on the Democratic Party coalition-building. Such activity has *never* helped the revolutionary cause—at the time of the Panthers or today.

Things could have turned out very differently if the Panthers had turned toward the multiracial working class—the force that uniquely has the ability to take control from the capitalist state. Today, there is no less a need to anchor the black struggle in the working class. Otherwise, you will be crushed and defeated or drown in the bourgeois establishment. It comes down to strategy. Are you looking to fight for community control hand in hand with the liberals and the Democrats or are you looking to build independent organs of power?

White workers have no shortage of reasons to take up the CCOP struggle as their own. For any serious fight for their needs to succeed, they will have to take head-on the racial divisions and find ways to counter the forces of the capitalist state they come up against. Nowadays, those forces are running amok thanks to Trump and need to be stopped to give workers of all backgrounds some breathing space. White workers can be won to the broader fight for black liberation on the same basis: the struggle for their own interests, both immediate and historic,

against the capitalist enemy will be qualitatively strengthened.

Neither the struggle for workers emancipation nor the struggle for black liberation can move forward without the other. As noted earlier, racial oppression is the preferred weapon of the ruling class to divide the working class and weaken its struggles. Both the Democrats and the Republicans are masters of the divide-and-conquer game. Right now, one part of the population blames the other part, and vice versa, for their worsening conditions. Very few blame those truly responsible: the U.S. capitalist class. For over a century and a half, the capitalist oppressors have been laughing all the way to the bank, as workers tear at one another for chump change.

To make matters worse, leftist groups have imbibed in all the liberal politics and parlance that are toxic to the unity of white workers and black people. Identity politics are especially corrosive. The only thing the left's embrace of liberalism has achieved is to further alienate the working class. The FRSO, which calls to vote for black Democrats as a crucial part of the black liberation movement, is no exception.

If you are going to tell white workers to vote for a capitalist politician because he is an ally of the black struggle when they know he is going to screw them, you are playing with fire. Giving such advice is all but certain to end badly—in particular, to stoke racial animosity, turn workers off to the black struggle and discredit you in their eyes. It's like telling them: "We don't care if he screws you over. As long as it's a black 'progressive' doing the screwing, it's all good."

What's Needed Now

It is very ominous that federal agents are now blowing away white people in broad daylight without a second thought. As the saying goes, "When white folks catch a cold, black folks catch pneumonia." Between Trump's thugs and the local



Open Police Archives

19 August 2025: Oakland rally demanding justice for Jalani Lovett, 27-year-old black man who died in L.A. County jail. We seek to rebuild the movement against cop terror around call to open the police archives.

cops, there is a clear and present danger. Something needs to be done.

However, the reality is that the masses are not with us right now. For revolutionaries, our task is to bring them closer in a way that builds up their defenses and prepares their mobilization as an independent organized force. While it might seem a distant prospect at the moment, there are things we could do to advance the unity of the working class and oppressed against the capitalist state. We should work together in these areas to maximize our reach and potential impact and further discuss the best way forward.

To begin, we invite the FRSO, NAARPR and all other left groups to join the campaign to Open the Police Archives (OPA). This campaign is a means to rebuild the movement against racist cop terror along lines capable of establishing community control of the police. How so?

Without question, opening the police archives is in the interests of black people and white workers alike. Exposure of cop crimes and cover-ups, their torture methods and spying operations, would sharpen attitudes against the existing system, facilitate the fight for justice for the victims and provide vital information to improve our defense against future attacks. This campaign is readily supportable by all working people, making it a good vehicle to draw together isolated struggles on behalf of individual victims of cop terror into a common movement.

But that is not all. The OPA demand carries the potential not only to unite workers and black people, but also to separate them from two-faced politicians and officials who are lackeys of the bourgeois establishment even while claiming to stand with black people. These types talk a good game, only to abandon black people when it counts. Violating state secrecy does not go over well with the capitalist rulers. So, OPA is a tool to sort

defenders of the black community from the fake talkers. All we have to do is put it to these officeholders: “You say you are on our side, so then open the police archives.” Their reaction will tell you everything you need to know.

That’s why we encourage the FRSO to take the OPA demand to Brandon Johnson, especially those members who remain unconvinced that he is *not* our ally in the struggle for CCOP. As the mayor, he has the keys to the city and is the commander-in-chief of the police department. If he wanted, he could have the archives opened overnight. We are under no illusion that he will ever even try to make this happen. But he very easily could—unless he was held back by allegiance to LaSalle Street and the country’s capitalist masters. Such a test of Johnson

and similar figures would provide proof that workers and black people must rely on their own independent strength to effectively defend themselves and organize toward control of their communities.

For that reason, we take the OPA campaign into the unions: Their going on record in defense of black people against racist cop terror facilitates mobilizing the ranks to that end. The flexing of some union muscle in defense of besieged black and brown communities would be a big help right now. The unions themselves are direct targets of the racist purges, anti-immigrant crackdowns and other attacks in Trump’s America.

But their leaders have kept them in check, not wanting to fall out of favor of the bosses’ politicians. We must go to the ranks and provide them the tools to get the unions off their backs and into fighting shape. Collective union action, such as protest against racist cop terror, strike action to stop ICE or the organization of defense guards to protect immigrant and black families, would substantially improve our chances of beating back the current onslaught. It would also put us in a far better position to fight for *real* community control of the police and everything else going forward.

The OPA campaign has the potential to further the unity of workers and the oppressed, the unity of individual struggles for justice and independence from those loyal to the power structure. These are the very foundations on which the black community must stand to gain control of the police. ■

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Reprinted from Workers Vanguard No. 1186, August 2025

Immigrant, Latino, Black LA

Liberals Paved the Way

for Reaction

Robert Gauthier/L.A. Times (top); Luis Sinco/L.A. Times (right)

The following is a document submitted by Spartacist League/U.S. Central Committee member Lital Singer for discussion at a Central Committee plenum.

The purpose of this document is to show how the SL/U.S.'s political disorientation—beginning in the 1980s and worsening throughout the post-Soviet period—paralyzed our Los Angeles local and why the political lessons are relevant to today. It will address the obstacles to organizing and uniting the city's multiracial working class at that time and what the tasks of Marxists were as against what the SL argued. It will also consider how these obstacles are posed in the present—and how to overcome them.

Deindustrialization and the Winds of Change

U.S. imperialism went through an extended crisis in the late 1960s and '70s. Its defeat in Vietnam was a real turning point, opening up a period of economic and political turmoil at home and abroad. L.A. was a hotbed of black radicalism. Much of the Black Panther leadership had roots in L.A., where they organized after the 1965 Watts uprising and also influenced the Chicano militancy of the late '60s.

However, the revolutionary openings of this period all ended in defeat. In L.A., the destruction of the Black Panthers, in part through murderous government repression, resulted in a vacuum that was filled by lumpen street gangs, whose activity escalated throughout the '80s. By then, U.S. imperialism was back

Liberal multiracial coalitions built by mayors from Bradley (bottom, back) to Villaraigosa and Bass (right) have only screwed over black, brown and working-class L.A.

on the offensive, marking the start of the neoliberal era of privatization, economic liberalization and high immigration.

Los Angeles, the second-largest city in the U.S., was transformed as a result. Deindustrialization happened early on. Starting in the '70s, a number of industries were hollowed out and replaced with service and tech jobs and an expanding entertainment industry, i.e., Hollywood. The city's black population was devastated amid a huge demographic shift fueled by immigration of mostly Mexicans, but also Central Americans, as U.S. domination and subjugation of their homelands intensified.

In the 1980s, Reaganism reigned supreme. The U.S. ruling class coupled aggressive anti-communism with a conscious policy of offshoring, both to destroy trade unions and get around the cost of modernizing U.S. industry in favor of buying cheap products from abroad. Over the first half of the decade, employment increased nationwide, but the nature of the available jobs was changing. According to William Lazonick in "The Financialization of the U.S. Corporation" (*Seattle U. L. Review*, 2013): "Employment of operators,

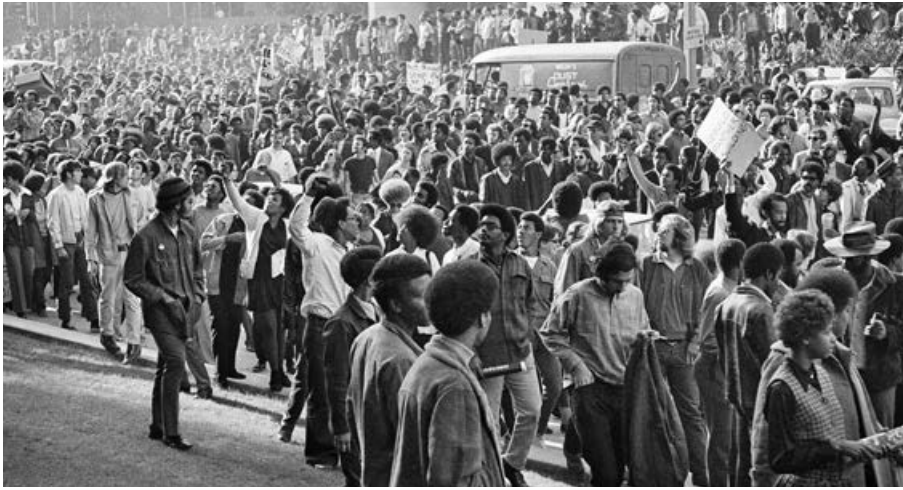


Doug Pizac/AP

fabricators, and laborers fell from 20 million to 16.8 million, a decline of 15.9%."

In 1981, early in his presidency, Reagan dealt a decisive defeat to the U.S. working class by crushing the PATCO air traffic controllers strike. This was followed by years of plant closures, which wiped out decent-paying union jobs in L.A. and beyond. A 1991 *Los Angeles Times* article on the area's auto manufacturing facilities noted that:

"Once upon a time, in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, they cut an imposing swath through the heart of Los Angeles County. There



11 December 1969: Thousands-strong Black Panther protest in downtown L.A., in response to police raid on BPP L.A. headquarters.

AP

was the Chrysler plant in the City of Commerce, the Ford plant in Pico Rivera, the General Motors plants in South Gate and Van Nuys, the Studebaker plant in Vernon, the Nash plant in El Segundo, the Willys-Overland plant in Maywood. When GM announced the closure of its Van Nuys plant Friday, it snuffed out the last glimpse of an era in which 15,000 or more Los Angeles auto workers put together half a million cars in a single year...”

L.A. County had been the second-largest automaking center in the nation, behind Detroit. By 1971, when the Chrysler plant shut down, imported cars already accounted for 41 percent of all sales in the city. Other industrial jobs were also decimated. Many of these jobs went overseas or to cheaper, non-union regions in the South and Southwest.

The Devastation of Black L.A.

It was the presence of industrial jobs that impelled many black people to migrate to L.A. (largely from Louisiana and Texas). The city’s black population surged during WWII and postwar and by 1970 had reached almost half a million, the largest in California. Although segregated, black people made up a key component of the working class.

Because the vast majority of the city was off-limits to black people, as it was to Latinos, black neighborhoods sprang up in proximity to the old barrios. This was both the seed of competition for scarce resources and the start of cultural exchange. In 1964, California passed Proposition 13, which enshrined the ability of homeowners to deny sales based on race. At this point, Latinos were a similarly sized demographic, albeit older than the black population. Some Latino groups organized against Prop 13 on the basis that this was their fight too—like black people, they wanted equality in education and housing. But other Latinos

who had progressed toward assimilation viewed anti-black racism as not their problem. While overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967, Prop 13 codified the practice in L.A. before and since, whether legally sanctioned or not.

L.A. schools were also segregated. In parts of South L.A. that were then overwhelmingly white and working class, like South Gate, the schools were almost 100 percent white. Black youth who lived near South Gate had to attend schools farther away that were 99 percent black. In 1976, the California Supreme Court ruled that L.A. had to integrate its schools. For three years, busing was implemented. The loudest voices against this were white parents in the San Fernando Valley who did not want their kids bused. But Latinos were also mobilized against busing in the name of defense of bilingual education. While Latinos did not have that much voting weight at the time, they were cynically used to claim that white liberals weren’t racist.

In 1979, the passage of California Prop 13 overturned busing. I grew up in L.A. in the ’80s, at which point the city’s public schools were 18 percent white. (Today, it’s only 10 percent.) Most of those white kids were in better-funded magnet programs that had racial quotas. The high school I went to had two magnet programs, which were integrated but had only a few hundred students. The rest of the school consisted of the “original” school attended by 2,000 students, almost all Latino and black and some Filipinos as well. Today, the L.A. school district is 74 percent Latino, and many kids go to schools with an almost 100 percent Latino student body.

In the 1970s, manufacturing was the top employer of black workers in L.A. Many belonged to unions and earned decent wages. Janitorial and hotel work

were mostly black union jobs, as was the postal service. Deindustrialization forced most black workers who stayed in L.A. to take low-wage service jobs. They then had to compete for these jobs with the rapidly increasing Latino immigrant population. All this has ramifications today: Black people are 8 percent of city residents, yet make up 42 percent of the homeless. In California, 28 percent of male prisoners are black, even though only 6 percent of the state’s adult male population is black.

By the 1980s, the historic core of working-class black L.A.—South Central and Compton—was changing. Immigrant groups, mostly from Mexico and Central America, were moving in, mainly because the traditional Latino areas were overflowing and they couldn’t move into the white areas. At the same time, a lot of black people who could do so left the city. The decimation of jobs, together with Reagan’s austerity measures and racist “war on crime,” brought intensified ghettoization and an increase in gangs, drugs and racist police terror and occupation. Police helicopters were called “ghetto birds” because they frequently circled overhead.

This is the golden age of gangster rap like Eazy E and N.W.A., reflecting the worsening state of black L.A. It was also the beginning of mass incarceration, which vastly accelerated under Clinton’s 1994 crime bill. The 1992 L.A. upheaval following the acquittal of the cops who beat Rodney King was an outpouring against not just rampant police brutality in the ghettos—then half Latino and half black—but also the wretched living conditions and job prospects that went back to deindustrialization.

L.A.’s Latino residents numbered 422,000 in 1970, around 820,000 in 1980 and 1.4 million in 1990. By 2020, almost two million Latinos resided in the city. In comparison, the slightly larger black population of 490,000 in 1970 barely ticked up to 500,000 a decade later. By 2020, that figure had dropped to 335,000. The white population was always the majority in L.A. until the ’90s (2.1 million in 1970, 1.8 million in 1980 and 1.3 million in 2020). Today, there is also a sizable Asian population which is 12 percent of the total. The city’s white working-class areas are long gone, since white workers moved outside the city to find work and more affordable housing.

Denying a Changing Reality

Our party didn’t have any supporters in the L.A. auto plants when the industry was uprooted in the 1980s, but we did fight in Fremont (GM’s Bay Area facility) and Detroit against plant closings. Our propaganda was pretty good, and

the UAW Militant Caucus worked tirelessly to stop the layoffs and keep Fremont open. But after the SL-supported caucuses disbanded, we stopped raising a program for the working class and oppressed to fight the devastation.

We couldn't deal with the major developments of this contradictory period, as Cold War reaction combined with ascendant neoliberalism. We defended the Soviet Union and fought imperialism abroad and at home—which came down hard on black people and immigrants at key points. We obviously knew there was a large increase in immigration. But our reaction was to cling to liberal moralism as opposed to basing ourselves on a Marxist understanding of the objective reality and the tasks flowing from it.

Despite the growth of the Latino population, we denied that a lasting demographic change was underway and projected both mass deportations and the mass assimilation of Latinos along racial lines. It was as if factoring the increasing weight of the Latino working class into our tasks would negate the centrality of the fight for black liberation to the American revolution. In fact, the opposite is true: To liberate Latinos from their exploitation and oppression necessitates fighting against black oppression, the key tool used by the capitalists to weaken and divide the proletariat. The history of working-class struggle in L.A. has made this very clear.

The refusal to take account of a changing reality led to many cannibalistic and moralist internal fights in L.A. and left many comrades unmoored. *Spartacist* No. 68 (September 2023) states that a party that claims to be Marxist but does not have a correct political and economic appreciation of the period cannot guide the working class in line with its class interests. Lacking a materialist grounding, this party will set tasks for itself, and for the proletariat, that necessarily reflect the interests of other classes. This helps explain why the different fights in L.A. over the black question, Latinos and immigrants have been mired in liberalism.

Liberalism on Immigration and the Black Question

In our seminal article “Hispanics, Refugees Targeted—Labor: Smash Racist Immigration Law!” (WV No. 427, 1 May 1987), we recognize “the growing importance of Hispanics in the United States, and the implications for revolutionaries.” But we then go on to quote our 1983 national conference document:

“As they are absorbed, Hispanics will tend to become assimilated mainly to whites...as with every new wave of immi-



Mike Sergieff/Herald Examiner/Los Angeles Public Library

Racist 1981 protest against busing black students to integrate junior high school in L.A.'s San Fernando Valley. Liberal integration efforts were defeated, and L.A. is still as segregated as ever.

grants, the first wave often faces brutal conditions—in this case, particularly the superexploitation growing out of undocumented workers' lack of legal rights.”

This is not what happened. Whatever the similarities among the “first waves,” Mexican and Central American immigrants' overall experiences have differed from those of pre-1920 Italian and Irish immigrants for a reason: their home countries are in the backyard of and oppressed by racist U.S. imperialism. Another key factor is the difference in the period. Prior to 1920, U.S. imperialism was on the rise, and its industrial base was growing. By the 1970s and '80s, U.S. imperialism was in decline, and there was not much of a ladder to climb.

There have been continuous waves of Latino immigration for decades in an extended period of relative stability. It is common for earlier generations to oppose the next wave, which the bourgeoisie uses as scab labor and to undercut their organizing. Being undocumented in huge numbers—something never faced by European immigrants—also impacts Latino prospects for assimilation. In L.A., while there are a number of Latinos who have “made it,” the vast majority have not. They are segregated in the worst schools and neighborhoods at a time when conditions have been worsening for the working class as a whole. Additionally, Latinos are 80 percent working-class and most don't get out of the class they are born into, partly due to discrimination.

The answer to the question of how to fight the oppression of Latinos is not so different from that of how to fight black oppression: We must fight for multiracial unity based on shared material interests against the bosses who pit one group against the other in a race to the bottom. It's not in the interests of white workers to have a layer of black workers below them,

bringing down everyone's wages. This is also true of the relationship between U.S.-born workers and undocumented immigrants. For example, in the 1980s when unionized black janitors were being laid off and replaced by non-union immigrant labor at dramatically reduced pay, there needed to be a citywide janitors strike to defend black workers' livelihoods and organize immigrants into the union at the same pay. As we would often say, the struggles go forward together or fall back separately. But to my knowledge, no one put forward a program to fight along these lines.

Instead, we approached the divisions between immigrants and black people by arguing that they had to overcome their mutual prejudices—a liberal approach. American Trotskyist Richard Fraser captured the heart of white liberalism:

“When applied to the Negro question, the theory of morality means that the root of the problem of discrimination and white supremacy is prejudice. This is the reigning theory of American liberalism and is the means by which the capitalists throw the responsibility for the Jim Crow system upon the population as a whole. If people weren't prejudiced there would be no Negro problem. This contention is fundamentally false.”

—“In Memoriam—Richard S. Fraser: An Appreciation and Selection of His Work,” *Prometheus Research Series* No. 3, August 1990

A liberal argument used to push the “melting pot” American Dream lie is that, unlike black people, Latino immigrants work hard and will do jobs black people won't do. This is an argument for superexploitation of immigrant labor.

The Neoliberals Feast on the Undocumented

The American bourgeoisie saw superexploitation of immigrants as a linchpin

of the neoliberal order that was emerging in the 1970s. The door to the mass influx of immigrants was opened by the 1965 immigration bill, which came out of the civil rights movement and got rid of racist quotas that were in place since the 1920s. Importantly, though, the neoliberals wanted mass *undocumented* immigration. Milton Friedman—one of the fathers of neoliberalism and a crafter of imperialist “shock therapy” in Latin America—gave the neoliberal argument in a 1978 lecture, “What is America?”:

“Look, for example, at the obvious, immediate, practical case of illegal Mexican immigration. That Mexican immigration, over the border, is a good thing. It’s a good thing for the illegal immigrants, it’s a good thing for the United States, it’s a good thing for the citizens of the country, but it’s only good so long as it’s illegal.... Why? Because as long as it’s illegal the people who come in do not qualify for welfare, they don’t qualify for social security, they don’t qualify for all the other myriads of benefits that we pour out from our left pocket into our right pocket, and so, as long as they don’t qualify, they migrate to jobs. They take jobs that most residents of this country are unwilling to take. They provide employers with workers of a kind they cannot get.”

Today, this is the main argument liberals use against Trump: You can’t deport all the immigrants, who will do these jobs? But such neoliberal notions have fallen out of fashion within the ruling class. Right before the election, JD Vance was asked by a liberal *New York Times* reporter: “So how do you propose to build all the housing necessary that we need in this country by removing all the people who are working in construction?” Vance responded: “You absolutely could re-engage folks into the American labor

market.... People say, well, Americans won’t do those jobs. Americans won’t do those jobs for below-the-table wages. They won’t do those jobs for non-living wages, but people will do those jobs...at certain wages.” This is an effective argument that appeals to native-born workers even though it’s a lie that Vance and Trump are going to create high-paying construction jobs. Instilling constant fear in a layer of workers only undermines the ability of the working class as a whole to fight the bosses’ attacks.

In neoliberalism’s heyday, we projected that Reagan was going to carry out mass deportations. In response to his 1986 immigration bill, which contained various nasty provisions, our press declared: “But this is just preparation for the avalanche of up to *two million* deportations the new law is expected to touch off” (WV No. 427, 1 May 1987). But as far as I could tell, there were no mass deportations that year. Today, the bill is remembered for having granted amnesty to three million Latinos, the last time that has happened in the U.S. To qualify, immigrants had to prove they came in before 1982. At the same time, the militarization of the border began. Previously, immigrants had gone back and forth between Mexico and the U.S., but now many of the undocumented became trapped for fear of not getting back in. Between 1980 and 2000, the Mexican immigrant population increased from about 2.1 million to nearly 9.2 million.

During this time, our articles recognize the huge shift in migration and demographics but saw this as conjunctural: “In every period of economic and political crisis in the United States during this

century the rulers have carried out mass deportations.” But in 1987 U.S. imperialism was not on the verge of crisis and instability, but rather was about to gain a new lease on life. Furthermore, our defense of immigrants was problematic:

“All the talk of ‘illegal aliens’ supposedly ‘stealing American jobs’ is hog-wash. ‘Illegals’ overwhelmingly work in the lowest-paid, dirtiest, backbreaking work no one else will do.... But these nativist appeals are having an effect, including among blacks, who are segregated at the bottom of American society and feel their precarious livelihoods threatened by the latest wave of low-wage immigrant labor....

“American workers who fall for the sucker-bait boss propaganda that their ‘illegal’ class brothers and sisters are ‘stealing jobs’ should try being a migrant farm worker.... And just as ‘Buy American’ ultimately means ‘kill Asians’—witness the brutal murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin in Detroit by a racist auto foreman and his stepson who thought he ‘looked Japanese’—so ‘English only’ has translated into ‘kill Latinos.’”

—WV No. 427, 1 May 1987

While it was correct to fight the chauvinist protectionism pushed by the labor bureaucracy, we provided no working-class alternative to nativism and neoliberalism. Instead, we essentially echoed liberal compassion and “enlightened” consciousness-raising. To argue to white and black workers who had lost their jobs that it’s better than being a migrant farm worker was a defense of the new liberal status quo.

The WV No. 427 article on immigration concludes that “Mexican nationalists repeat the lament of conservative dictator Porfirio Díaz: ‘Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.’ Proletarian *internationalists* greet the fact that massive infusion of Hispanic workers from south of the border can serve as a human bridge for revolutionary class struggle throughout the Americas.” This deeply flawed argument was repeated in our press for the next few decades.

We labeled as “nationalist” the recognition that Mexico is directly under the boot of U.S. imperialism and that this oppression fuels mass migrations. We countered with “internationalism,” putting a gloss on this process and presenting immigrants as somehow inherently advanced. The claim that Mexican and Central American immigrants brought class-struggle traditions to the U.S. and were radicalizing the class here is idealist and, frankly, patronizing. As Marxists we understand that being determines consciousness. Immigrant workers without status are fed anti-black racism to head off multiracial unity and are kept in fear of deportation. Whatever the amount of struggle they waged in their home coun-



Mike Sergieff/Herald Examiner/Los Angeles Public Library

UAW protest against threatened closing of General Motors plant in Van Nuys, California, 1983.

try, they are not automatically revolutionaries in the U.S.

The Clinton Years and Our Loss of Purpose

Before Clinton was elected president in 1992, Republicans had won the state of California in nearly every presidential election dating back to 1952. Since then, California has been a liberal Democratic Party stronghold. Under Clinton, there was a significant growth in international trade, massive offshoring of production and an explosion of international capital circulation, i.e., globalization. Clinton gave this profound shift a social liberal cover. “Communism is dead” and liberal capitalism is proclaimed the pinnacle of human civilization. The U.S. and its allies ruled the world in the name of liberal principles like “freedom and democracy” and “defense of the defenseless.” California and particularly L.A. were key to this new world order of free trade, open capital markets and high levels of immigration.

By the early 1990s, Latinos had surpassed whites as L.A.’s largest racial/ethnic group. That decade, Latino immigrants in the city increased their organizing against their abysmal pay and conditions. We again attributed to them near-revolutionary consciousness that would revitalize labor. We also claimed to be unique in calling for full citizenship rights for immigrants, which was ludicrous. In our article “Latino Workers: New Force for Labor Struggle” (WV No. 541, 27 December 1991), we also argued:

“The answer to anti-foreigner racism will come from united working-class struggle, in which the increasingly highly unionized immigrant workers can play a leading role. Examples of this range from the valiant Mexican women garment workers striking against the sweatshops of El Paso, to the Los Angeles ‘Janitors for Justice’ many of whom got their experience fighting for union rights in El Salvador.”

But economic struggle alone cannot overcome the deep racial and ethnic divisions in the class. To accomplish that requires building a conscious class-struggle union leadership in opposition to trade-union bureaucrats who fuel these divisions.

Our press declared that the struggles of Latino immigrants were driving “the transformation of Los Angeles from a largely open-shop city to Strike City U.S.A.” (WV No. 871, 26 May 2006). But L.A. was not and had not been an open-shop city for decades. While L.A. was an open shop in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 1910 bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building—for which union ironworkers, the McNamara brothers, were convicted—this hadn’t really been true since the 1930s.



Kirk McCoy/L.A. Times

29 April 1992: Cops attack protesters during L.A. upheaval after acquittal of the cops who beat Rodney King.

The establishment of the CIO unions was a major catalyst for union growth in L.A. For example, following the 1936-37 sitdown strikes in Flint, Michigan, the UAW was recognized at GM assembly plants nationwide, including the South Gate plant in L.A. By 1939, the Teamsters had organized more than 25,000 truck drivers and become the city’s largest union. And, of course, the ILWU longshore union was coastwide.

A useful book detailing the history of L.A. labor from 1880 to 2010 is *Sunshine Was Never Enough* by John Laslett. As he writes, “If there was any one year in which the open shop in Los Angeles can be said to have entered a period of terminal decline, 1937 was probably that year. No fewer than 113 organizing strikes, many of them successful, took place in the city. . . . By the time the U.S. entered World War II, the long reign of the open shop in Southern California was effectively over.”

During the L.A. upheaval in 1992, we presented consciousness as having grown by leaps and bounds simply as a result of the outburst of elemental rage. We argued that it was “self-evident” that both capitalist parties are corrupt and, in effect, that no one had illusions in liberalism. In WV No. 551 (15 May 1992), we correctly called for the powerful L.A. unions such as longshore, aerospace and city workers to organize work stoppages and mass mobilizations in defense of the black community, later adding: “This is not ‘pie in the sky.’” But given that we were no longer trying to combat the pre-existing divisions in the class to unite it in such struggle, this was pie in the sky. No longer fighting for class-struggle leadership in the unions, we were just a pressure group calling on the labor bureaucrats to defend the ghetto that was rising up in opposition

to the devastation that the bureaucrats had done nothing to fight.

We argued that the fact that the upheaval was multiracial was in itself a refutation of black nationalism as well as liberalism: “The L.A. upheaval and its sympathetic echoes throughout the country give the lie to the preachers of both white liberal and black nationalist despair.” But black nationalist despair was a product of decades of white liberal betrayals. The aftermath of the upheaval only fueled the despair, as the competition for scarce resources increased. This gives context to Farrakhan’s Million Man March a few years later under the call for black self-sufficiency. Instead of putting forward a scientific program to guide the working class along the road to power, we transformed Marxism into an idealistic spirit of rebellion.

We also described the world as defined by right-wing reaction instead of liberal triumphalism. Flowing from this, we set the main task to be beating back this reaction, presenting ourselves as unique in this regard. This was disorienting, to say the least. By painting the world as mired in a dark age with only us defending democratic rights, we could push the most basic liberal demands as inherently revolutionary.

Dems Posture as Pro-Immigrant

The consequences of this logic played out clearly in California. In 1994, the anti-immigrant Prop 187 backed by Republican governor Pete Wilson was headed toward approval. We argued that “a demonstration of some tens of thousands of workers and youth” was “too hot for most of the Democratic politicians to handle” when in fact the demos were *led* by the liberal Democrats.

In our article “Mobilize California Labor to Smash Anti-Immigrant Racism!” (WV No. 608, 14 October 1994), we cite a TV ad for Prop 187 and continue:

“This campaign is aided and abetted by a handful of black demagogues who argue that Latinos are ‘stealing’ black jobs and social services.... This is deadly dangerous for both Latinos and black people. It is vital for Latino workers to understand that the color line has always been the central, strategic question in racist, capitalist America. And blacks must understand that immigrant-bashing and anti-black racism go hand in hand.”

But the liberal leadership of the anti-Prop 187 movement was also breeding division and deadly dangerous to black people and Latinos. It was not possible to make any headway in the fight to improve conditions for the oppressed in alliance with the liberal forces responsible for gutting education and social services in the name of “enlightened” values. The capitalists pit one section of the working class against another to weaken its struggles and obscure that they are the real enemy. Black parents in L.A. had legitimate grievances, even while bilingual education had suddenly become the main need of most students in neighborhood schools. To counter the channeling of this anger in a right-wing direction, socialists should have fought against the divisive liberal schemes and for *more* resources for quality, integrated and bilingual education, at the bosses’ expense.

Instead, the WV No. 608 article attributed the problem entirely to the march of reaction, declaring: “The current sharp rise in anti-immigrant racism in the U.S. is part of a worldwide phenomenon, which has reached a fever pitch with fascist terror against immigrants in Europe.... With the destruction of the USSR, the imperialist bourgeoisies no longer feel the need to maintain the facade of granting asylum

to refugees and are slamming the doors shut.” But from NAFTA and the “end of welfare as we know it” to immigration policy, the Clinton administration was the face of *unfettered neoliberalism with a social-liberal veneer*. His presidency represented a sharp shift in the Democratic Party away from any association with the New Deal and the left.

Nonetheless, simply declaring the Democrats to be as anti-immigrant as the Republicans reflected a refusal to take on liberalism’s “enlightened” pro-immigrant posture. The opposition to Pete Wilson helped activate California’s rapidly growing Latino population and turn them against the Republicans. Clinton’s motto was “a new covenant with the American People.” His gutting of welfare was couched as “empowering the poor and expanding the middle class.” His 1996 platform said: “We deplore those who use the need to stop illegal immigration as a pretext for discrimination.” It also offered that a Republican effort to bar the children of illegal immigrants from schools was “wrong, and forcing children onto the streets is an invitation for them to join gangs and turn to crime.”

In the mid 1990s, the new AFL-CIO chief and DSA member, John Sweeney, personified the shift in labor toward support for neoliberalism. He endorsed liberal values and appealed to women, black people and immigrants but rejected old-school trade-union struggle as strikes continued to decline and unions shrank. Sweeney worked closely with Clinton and was on the advisory commission that endorsed Clinton’s free-trade initiatives for the World Trade Organization.

Black rights were being thrown back in tandem with the unions, and segregation deepened. But this was uneven. For a layer of black households, income mark-

edly increased throughout the ’90s, while the situation for younger, non-college educated black people became much worse.

In L.A., we needed to fight for black, white and Latino working-class unity in explicit opposition to the liberal Democratic “unity” in support of the new status quo. Instead, we denied that black people’s grievances were just, implicitly attributing those grievances to anti-immigrant backwardness, which could only serve to further drive black people into the arms of black nationalists. We also lectured Latinos that “the color line has always been the central, strategic question” in the U.S. But we failed to address *why* the fight against black oppression was their fight too. Latinos and black people have been and continue to be pitted against each other for jobs, education and housing. These divisions can only be overcome by motivating their shared material interests in joint class struggle against the capitalists and U.S. imperialism, not by moralistic browbeating.

How “Progressive” Identity Politics Played Out in L.A.

Our article, “Down With Capitalist Rulers’ War Against Blacks, Immigrants!” (WV No. 724, 26 November 1999) acknowledges that the sense of unity between black people and Latinos during the 1992 riots did not long survive the suppression and continues:

“Self-declared spokesmen for the black and Hispanic communities engaged in hostile competition over government money earmarked for rebuilding South Central and the other damaged neighborhoods. And in doing so, they used the same kind of demagoguery as white racists.... And two years later, half of all black voters supported California Proposition 187.”

But that’s not what black and Latino community leaders in South L.A. were



David McNew/Hulton



Nick Ut/AP

Left: Latino SEIU janitors vote overwhelmingly to strike, rejecting bosses’ paltry 18-cent pay raise, April 2000. Right: Over one million demonstrate for immigrant rights, May Day 2006. Aspirations of the Latino masses to improve their conditions have been held back by liberal leadership.

mainly doing. Karen Bass, for example, earned her spurs pushing “black-brown unity” behind Democratic Party liberals. The claim was that such multiclass coalitions linked to the city rulers would “uplift all of us.” Black people and Latinos competed for “representation,” but did so under the veneer of multiracial unity. This liberal model was not new, it just reflected the changed demographics. Tom Bradley, who was L.A.’s first black mayor from 1973 to ’93, initiated a coalition of black Angelenos together with representatives of the liberal Jewish community, the growing Latino and Asian populations and the unions.

The WV No. 724 article notes that “behind the term ‘people of color’ is a political outlook and implicit program” and correctly argues against the false notions that white workers are to blame for racial oppression and that all “people of color” share common interests. But “people of color” ideology denied the hard color line in America and was designed to “unite” black and Latino struggle on the basis of liberalism, which is inherently divisive and a dead end. The article treats liberalism not as the period’s dominant ruling-class ideology, but as the well-intentioned ideas of youth looking to fight racism.

Lastly, based on our years-long wrong assessment that “since the early ’90s the pendulum of bourgeois politics has been swinging ever more strongly toward anti-immigrant nativism,” the article projects “the repatriation of the 5.5 million ‘illegal’ immigrants now in the U.S.” This was all very disorienting for our local in Los Angeles, whose ethnic makeup had already radically changed by late 1999, when the article was written.

Karen Bass and the Community Coalition

In 2006, during the Bush Jr. years and in the lead-up to Obama’s election, L.A. was witness to massive protests for immigrant rights—over a million were in the streets on May Day. At this point, we were forced to deal with the changed demographics, but we never dealt with why our predictions did not happen. The demos were a classic popular-front movement of immigrant rights groups, liberal politicians, labor and the left. We recognized that the Democrats headed the movement, but we never fought to split it along class lines and provide revolutionary leadership to the immigrant rights struggle.

Our polemics against the left were not based on their alliance with the liberals, but on the scope of their demands—they called for amnesty, while we called for full citizenship rights. Similar to BLM,



City of Los Angeles

DSA-LA City Council members Eunisses Hernandez and Hugo Soto-Martinez stand alongside Governor Gavin Newsom and Mayor Karen Bass in push for initiative to “help” the homeless by tearing down encampments. With “socialists” like these, who needs enemies?!

the immigrant rights movement had an underlying contradiction. There was an enormous desire to improve the status of immigrants, many of whom have toiled for over two decades without papers. But to truly achieve that requires confronting the interests of the bourgeoisie, which reaps massive profits from the superexploitation of the undocumented. Hence, the movement’s bourgeois liberal program could only lead to defeat for the Latino working masses. Today, the left looks back to these protests as a model to repeat. Here is a case of first time tragedy, second time farce, as the liberals and union leaders have other ideas.

Only shortly before, L.A. had elected its first Latino mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa. He was a UTLA teachers union organizer who placed himself in the tradition of Bradley’s multiracial coalition. The mayor and the head of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, Maria Elena Durazo, were prominent in the immigrant rights protests. They both campaigned and worked for Obama, who after the 2008 economic crisis became notorious as the biggest ever Deporter-in-Chief, with over three million deported. The Democrats promised immigration reform, but undocumented Latino immigrants and their children got no real status and no economic ladder to climb, while living and working conditions have deteriorated, like for the rest of the working class. This betrayal led many Latinos to support Trump in 2016 and even more to do so last year, and some others to look to Chicano/Mexican nationalism in despair.

Mayor Karen Bass’s election in 2022 was seen as the culmination of decades of L.A.’s liberal “black-brown coalition” building. Like Brandon Johnson, who was elected Chicago mayor at the same

time, she got her support from “progressive” black and Latino activists as well as labor—e.g., the “social justice” liberal-led teachers union, the transit and healthcare unions and the L.A. labor federation.

A month before the mayoral election, a recording was leaked of prominent Latino members of the L.A. City Council and the Latino head of the L.A. labor federation “discussing strategies for using the city’s redistricting process to maximize Latina/o political power and dilute the power of Black voters.” Nury Martinez, then head of the city council, spewed racist crap against the city’s Oaxacan indigenous and black communities. As NPR noted, “What Nury Martinez was heard saying on this leaked tape were just about the worst things you could say as a politician in a city like Los Angeles, where cross-racial coalitions are so important in politics.”

Erika Smith, a black columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote that the substance of the recording confirms the “worst fears of many Black Angelenos: that Latino politicians treat political power as a zero-sum game. That because of their numbers, they will take over the leadership of the city, and that because of their racist beliefs, they will ignore our needs.” Smith concluded that the incident had shattered the popular narrative of Los Angeles—and California more generally—being a “multicultural mecca, where Black and brown people build alliances to work together.” The recordings captured that lurking beneath the multiracial veneer is the vicious competition over shrinking resources inherent to decaying U.S. capitalism.

What does L.A.’s black population need? The same things as the Latino and other working masses: reindustrialization and union jobs, decent integrated housing and education near where they work

and free, quality healthcare. The only way to get anything for black, brown and working-class L.A. is to wage integrated class struggle against Karen Bass and the capitalist interests she represents. This requires a break with the liberal forces overseeing the devastation.

The liberal multiracial coalition paved the way for the current polarizations and rising reaction, driving black people and Latinos toward Trump. When running for mayor, Bass referred to the decades of progress since the 1990s when things were so bad and how all that was under threat. Her Community Coalition claimed to “unite the voices of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and people of color to bring about social change together. CoCo works on the frontlines of social change to dismantle systemic racism and economic inequity.” But racist oppression and economic inequity have only gotten worse.

A 2016 research paper put out by Duke University, “The Color of Wealth in Los Angeles,” noted that black and Mexican households have 1 percent of the wealth of whites in Los Angeles—or one cent for every dollar. The median value of liquid assets was \$0 and \$7 for Mexicans and other Latinos, respectively, but was \$110,000 for white households. At the same time, there is gentrification of the barrios. Between 2010 and 2016, the median monthly rent in Boyle Heights—a historic and impoverished Mexican area—jumped from around \$1,500 to \$2,200. Today, it’s \$2,400. Actual mariachis were evicted from a building renamed “Mariachi Crossing” for the explicit purpose of making way for wealthy tenants.

A Program for L.A.

The DSA-LA, which currently has four elected Dems (over one-quarter of the seats) on the city council, put out a “Program for LA” for 2022 that correctly notes that in the early 1990s a “multiracial coalition” cohered “to challenge the Republican stronghold on politics and reinvigorate the stagnant Democratic Party establishment that managed the interests of a different faction, primarily business and real estate, within California’s capitalist class.” They also observe that “the dominant power structure within LA County can be described as a status quo coalition which invokes ‘progressive’ language while espousing neoliberal policies and views.”

But they then propose to rebuild the very alliance with liberalism that has screwed L.A.—which is what their elects do in L.A. now. They essentially argue for a new multiracial coalition, with better liberal forces, to push a bunch of liberal reforms, while conveniently not mention-



Workers Vanguard

L.A., 14 June 2025: Spartacists fight for united working-class struggle to beat back escalating ICE raids and roundups.

ing Karen Bass. They say, “This coalition is not a single unified power” and that building an alternative to the status quo coalition will “require winning over some elements of the coalition”—i.e., break the liberal “progressives” away from the particularly hated Dems like those on the leaked recording.

The upshot, of course, is that they perniciously give a “socialist” cover to the worsening situation. One of their city council elects, Eunisses Hernandez, tried to sell out her constituents who organized a tenants union and had been on a rent strike for almost five years, making a deal that favored the landlords at the expense of the tenants. The group of local DSA elects includes the infamous Nithya Raman, a Zionist supporter of genocide, whom the DSA-LA endorsed based on her fight for “housing.” She voted for Bass’s new racist police chief, despite DSA-LA’s call on Bass to “reject and withdraw the nomination.” Another elected on city council, Hugo Soto-Martinez, puts forward useless legislation in response to mass deportations, such as “requiring businesses report ICE actions in the city.” So, now the bosses who profit from superexploitation are going to protect immigrants.

Both the DSA elects and the left blame racism and the rise of reaction on Trumpism, but this obscures how liberalism has been at the root of the problem and responsible for many years of attacks and betrayals. Trump’s second election reflected the death of liberalism as U.S. imperialism’s dominant ideology. The liberal “multiracial coalition” was given a hammer blow by Trump, who boasts of having won almost half the Latino vote and an increased share of the black

vote. Bass, who wrote the “George Floyd Justice in Policing Act” a few years ago, has since appointed a white racist police chief in the name of “boosting officer morale” prior to the Olympics, when lots of “morale” will be needed to sweep skid row and lock up the black and brown poor. In response to the wildfires, she’s doing all she can to rebuild wealthy enclaves, while the housing crisis worsens for the vast majority of Angelenos.

The social decay inherent in the imperialist epoch can only be overcome by a class-independent fight against *both* wings of the imperialist bourgeoisie. For the workers movement to continue on the decades-old failed course of political blocs with liberals only ensures that there will be no actual fight to “make LA for the working people,” as the DSA claims to stand for—much less to defend immigrants and fight for black and brown liberation. Our task, in L.A. and nationally, is to bridge the gulf between the left and the black, Latino and immigrant working masses by showing that their struggles are connected to the immediate and historic interests of all workers.

Thousands of young Latinos have been out in the streets in L.A. to protest against Trump’s deportations, but they are isolated and abandoned by the liberals. The left in L.A., which was never very influential to begin with, is seen by workers either as irrelevant or as liberal sellouts. The central task for the left in L.A.—and for our party—is to overcome this divide in order to be able to guide much-needed defensive struggles. Hopefully, in laying out the lessons of past decades, this document will help us to intervene today to maximum effect. ■

Editorial...

(continued from page 2)

an integrated working-class fight against the U.S. ruling class that is brutalizing the whole world.

But the misleadership, defeats and disorientation of the past period put us in a miserable situation. The righteous moral browbeating of Democrats presiding over the devastation of the working class repelled workers and drove them sharply to the right. The once massive BLM movement crashed into a dead end when the liberal wing of the ruling class saw that posturing for black lives no longer served their interests. By embracing liberalism, the left widened the gaps between itself, workers and the oppressed. Now faced with changing winds, some “leftists” turn their backs on black oppression to emphasize bland bread-and-butter economic issues while avoiding hot “racial” topics. They’re still mimicking the Democrats, who now try to woo white workers by canceling the “woke” show.

The liberals’ supposed solution to systemic racism has been defeated. The article “DEI: Moral Crusade Ignites Witchhunt—Labor Must Oppose Racist Purges” (page 3) shows how DEI did little to help black people, but did ignite a racist backlash. Trump’s slashing of DEI launched a racist purge of federal workers and a rollback of civil rights gains. The unions must oppose these attacks to defend themselves from Trump’s union-busting schemes. But the union misleaders confine their “fight” to the bosses’ courts.

The state of the movement against police brutality painfully proves that the liberal strategy is not working. The black community is still plagued by rampant police harassment, violence and murder. It is understandable in racist capitalist America that black people want control over how their communities are policed. But BLM came and went, and nothing changed. So, what now? In the article “How to Get *Real* Community Control” (page 56) we take on the strategy of the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, one of the few groups still fighting police brutality. Despite some revolutionary rhetoric, they still look to black Democrats to somehow get the police on their side. But for black people to control the cops, the existing state apparatus must be replaced. In the struggle against the cops, we insist that the only acceptable methods are ones that expose the nature of the capitalist state, and politically prepare the masses for when their struggles inevitably come up against it. Impermissible are those methods which lull the masses with illusions that class collaboration can control the capitalists’ killers.

Victims of police brutality and their families desperately seek justice, but only find mazes of red tape. They face bureaucratic obstacles and court delays for years. If a killer cop ever actually goes on trial, the cold-blooded murderer usually gets off anyway. The system is not on our side. We need another way to fight. The article “How to Get Justice” (page 32) lays out one path of struggle we advocate against the cops. Our Open the Police Archives campaign seeks to rebuild the movement on a class-struggle basis. We seek to mobilize workers to defend victims of cop terror. The core of our campaign is fighting to expose cop crimes and the hypocritical politicians who claim to defend black people but defend state secrecy.

Attacks are ramping up every day. Communists must link the black struggle to the workers movement to strengthen both. The working class has the power and objective interest to end black oppression. The articles in the section “Fighting for Black Liberation in the Unions” (page 28) show how putting the fight for black liberation at the center of labor’s battles will strengthen the unions. In the ILA, we must fight against segregated locals. In the ILWU, we must fight against the tier system that keeps the workforce divided and black workers at the bottom. In all instances, we must fight against the labor misleaders who enforce the divisions that benefit the bosses.

The article on Los Angeles (page 47) explains how the ruling class devastated black L.A. and wiped out union jobs in one fell swoop. The left’s disorientation (including our own) in the post-Soviet period meant that there was no revolutionary pole that could build black and brown unity on a class basis amid changing demographics. Instead, the liberals inflamed racial divisions and paved the way for reaction. With L.A. being a battleground in Trump’s war on immigrants, it’s urgent to understand the failures of liberalism on this question.

We believe the articles presented here stand as models for the left, in contrast to the liberal moralizing which has been undeniably unable to undercut the influence of right-wing demagogues on workers and youth. For more on this failure, see “Kirk Still Needs to Be Proved Wrong” (page 7), which articulates actual arguments against the racist bigotry we must politically defeat in the workers movement.

The imperialists are turning the screws here to prop up the planet-wide plantation, so black struggle must be against U.S. empire. We include here two pieces concerning South Africa. One is a speech given at the recent annual Holiday Appeal for Class-War Prisoners, hosted by the

Partisan Defense Committee. This speech (page 11) was part of the ICL’s international defense campaign for Julius Malema, leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), who the South African government targeted at the behest of the U.S. imperialists. The other, an article by our comrades of Spartacist/South Africa, puts forward a class-struggle, anti-imperialist, united-front strategy to liberate South Africa, which is counter to the parliamentarist-nationalist strategy of the EFF (page 12).

Finally, we must not forget the fighters who came before us, or the lessons embodied in their struggles. Assata Shakur, Black Panther and Black Liberation Army militant, died on September 25 of last year in Cuba, having escaped the murderous vendetta of the U.S. rulers. We include in this issue an appreciation of her fight (page 38) as well as a transcript of the powerful 1973 communiqué she recorded while in jail (page 40).

Today, many young activists are unfamiliar with the racist frame-up of former Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal. He remains behind bars, condemned to “slow-motion death row.” The speech here (page 35), given at the aforementioned PDC event, seeks to bring the fight to free Mumia—as well as the lessons of his case—to the new generation.

Standing on the work of Trotskyist and fighter for black freedom, Richard S. Fraser (1913-1988), we see the legacy of slavery and the peculiarities of American capitalist development which inextricably bound the fate of all working people to the fight for black liberation (page 15). There will be no socialist revolution without labor fighting for black people, and there will be no black liberation without a working-class fight. A strategy based on this understanding is essential to go forward.

We believe that the pieces presented in this pamphlet provide a program to overcome many of the main obstacles that block the struggle for black liberation and workers’ emancipation today. We offer this contribution to the necessary debate over how to both defend ourselves and push the fight forward in this reactionary period.

For black liberation through socialist revolution! ■



Reply to FRSO

How to Get *Real* Community Control



C. Bettmann; Library of Congress (inset)

Red Guard of Petrograd at May Day demo, 1917. In October, armed workers seized power from capitalist rulers, replacing their security forces. Inset: 4th U.S. Colored Infantry in Washington, D.C., during Civil War.

For black people in America, it should be a basic right to be able to wake up and start your day without the looming fear that a chance encounter with a cop could make it your last day living. Or to be driving and see flashing lights in your rearview mirror and not have your heart stop for a moment. Police brutalize and kill black people with impunity on a daily basis in this country. They are three times more likely to be killed by the police than whites—and twice more likely than Latinos. Instances of killings by the police have been on the increase nationally. As the murders of Renee Nicole Good and Alex Pretti show, vicious state repression is not

limited to black and brown people. With Trump's threats of sending in the National Guard to occupy major cities and ICE and border patrol besieging immigrant communities, the victims of state torment will only continue to increase.

The desire to have control over whether you or your loved ones become the next fatal statistic is not only reasonable and just but urgent. For many, the demand for community control of the police embodies just that sentiment. For decades, this demand has been raised by the left as a way to fight police repression. It was a rallying cry for many who took to the streets under the banner of BLM in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. But today, black people are no closer to being in control of anything, let alone the police, who

rampage through their neighborhoods and commit brutal violence on the regular. This is itself a reflection of the brutal reality of capitalist society where black people are forcibly segregated at the bottom. Even worse, protests against police brutality have all but dried up.

One of the few groups on the left that has continued to show up and fight against cop terror is the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) and in particular their organization, the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (NAARPR). In our work to rebuild the movement against police terror through the campaign to Open the Police Archives and expose liberal politicians as an obstacle to this cause, we have frequently run

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